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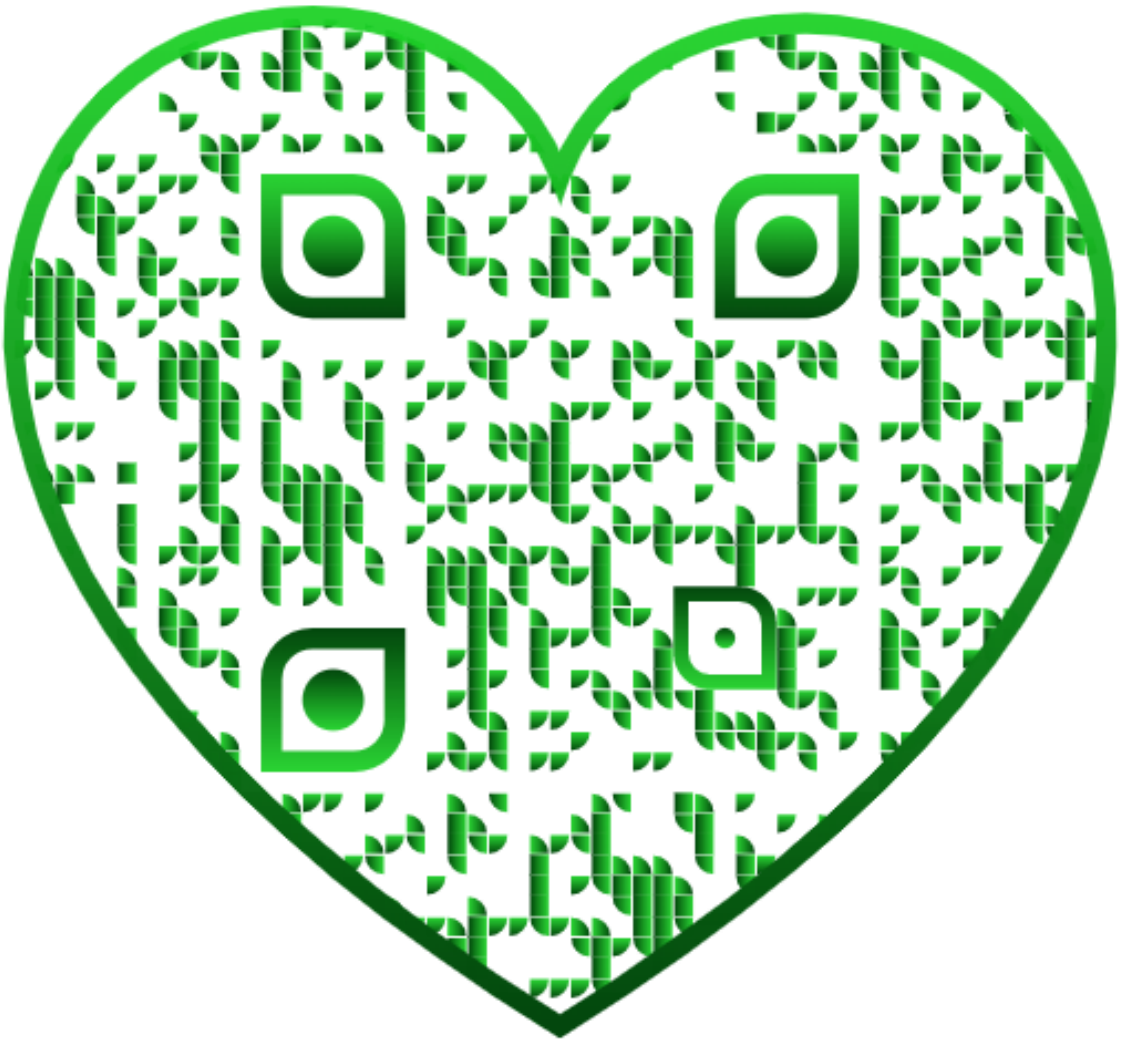

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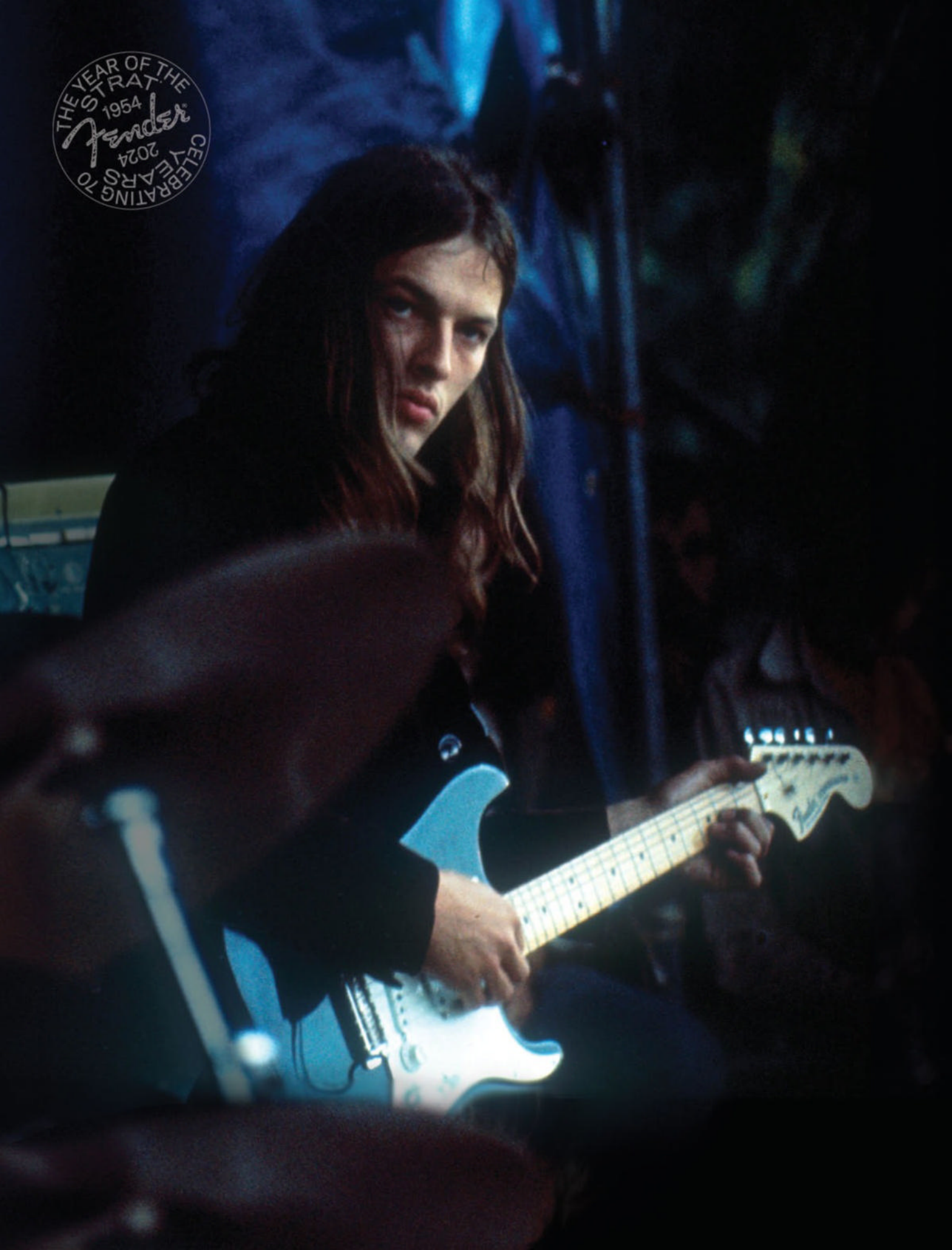
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THE POWER OF CHANGE

WHEN WE SET out to get an exclusive interview with Gary Clark Jr. for this issue, his new album wasn't even available for preview yet. But we just knew we'd want to speak once again with the guitarist who reinvigorated the blues movement with his fusion of blues, rock and soul and has remained a player to watch, listen and learn from.

So it was a delight to hear the transformation in his musical direction on *JPEG RAW*, his new record, which is by turns soulful, funky, psychedelic, symphonic and, yes, even at times bluesy. As Gary explains to Joe Bosso in this issue's interview, the pandemic gave him a chance to rediscover his love of shred and grow creatively in new directions. "I was doing whatever I wanted," he tells us. "I wasn't worried about being Gary Clark Jr., or whoever everybody thinks they know."

Changing up your groove is essential for creative growth. And while it carries the risk of alienating your audience, artists who listen to their heart know of no other way forward. Frankly, I like change, and find myself inspired whenever a musician forges a new direction, as Gary has. I understand why some people prefer things to stay as they are. But change brings something new and often challenging into our lives, and gives us a chance to grow emotionally, spiritually and artistically. And the more we do it, and survive it, the less distressed we are by life's unexpected, and more difficult, transitions. Change can be powerful, and empowering.

Transformation is a recurring topic in this issue. It's taking place in the music of Sarah Longfield, famous on YouTube for her preternatural (and wonderfully melodic) extreme shredding skills, on an eight-string guitar no less. As Sarah tells Andrew Daly, she's changed her approach since putting her music career on hold to pursue a college degree. "I've chilled out," she says. "I've been trying to find a middle ground between stuff that is both fun to play and easy to listen to."

And then there's the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach, who tells us how he and Patrick Carney went to great lengths to work collaboratively on their latest album, *Ohio Players*. In addition to writing and recording with Beck and Noel Gallagher, they teamed up with Memphis rappers Juicy J and Lil Noid to bring even more creative community to their jam. As Dan tells Gary Graff, "I know we couldn't have done it 10 years ago, 15 years ago. It wouldn't have been possible for us, 'cause we were just too in our own heads."

There's a different kind of change at work in my story about Marshall Crenshaw's brilliant but unsung 1983 sophomore LP, *Field Day*. Like the other musicians mentioned here, Marshall moved purposefully to reshape his sound when he cut the record. Rather than rehash the sonic formula that worked so well for his hit 1982 debut, he made the album that he heard in his head and heart, only to pay the price. Critics balked at Marshall's new direction, and his career momentum got knocked sideways. But some 40 years later, *Field Day* has earned a glowing reassessment from a growing base of fans who hear it for the power-pop sensation that it is and always has been.

So dig in! You have another packed issue of *Guitar Player* in your hands. I hope you find as much inspiration in these stories as I do.

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CONTENTS

MAY 2024 | VOLUME 58 | NUMBER 5

PLAYERS

36
Tinsley Ellis

40
Gary Clark Jr.

50
Dan Auerbach

56
Max Light

64
Marshall Crenshaw

FRETS

72
25 New Acoustic Products

NEW & COOL

17
Carr Bel-Ray

ALBUMS

20
Jane Getter

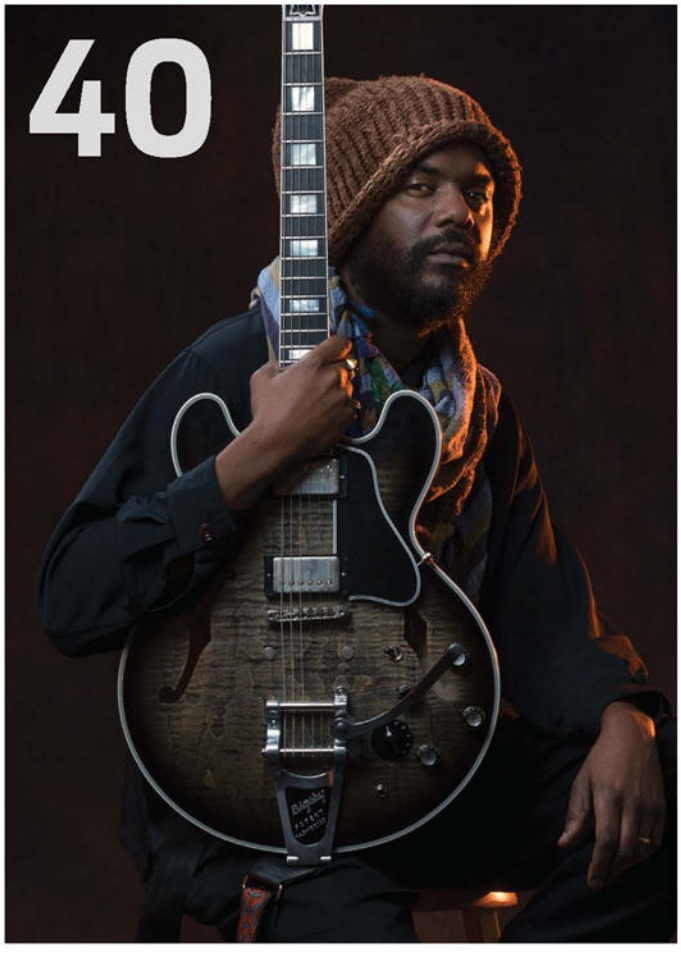
STYLE

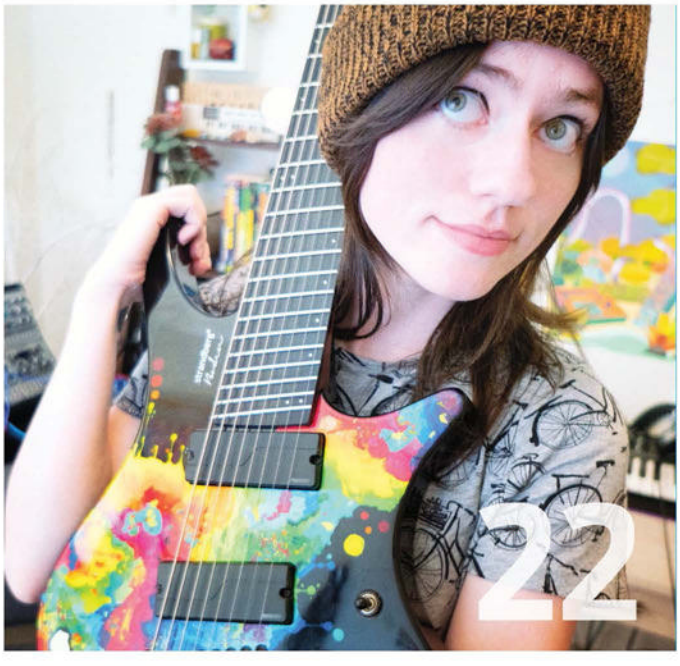
22
Sarah Longfield

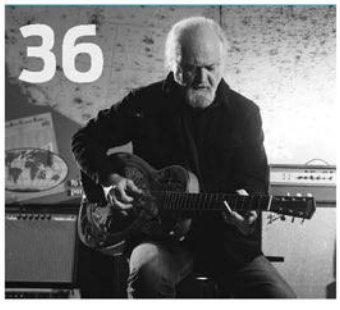
TIPSHEET

24
John 5

ON THE COVER
Gary Clark Jr., photographed by Max Crace, in Austin, 2024







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CONTENTS

MAY 2024 | VOLUME 58 | NUM 5

EVENTS

26
America at the Crossroads

FIVE SONGS

28
Peter Frampton

COLUMNS

32
Dave Hunter's Classic Gear
PRS Custom 24
"Bonni Pink" Signature

34
Jim Campilongo's Vinyl Treasures
Betty Davis — *Betty Davis*

LESSONS

78
Fingerstyle Rock Guitar, Part 2

82
The beauty of old wood

GEAR

84
PRS SE CE24, Custom 24 Quilt and Swamp Ash Special

87
Stedman PureConnect GP-2 and PK-3 Cleaning Kits

88
Dr. Z Z-80 head

90
Klos Grand Cutaway Mini

92
Donner/Third Man Hardware Triple Threat

HOW I WROTE...

98
Robin Trower reveals the story behind his 1974 signature track, "Day of the Eagle"

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NEW & COOL

ENGLISH CHANNEL

Carr's new **Bel-Ray** combo packs the essence of classic British amp tone together with a tremolo that's out of this world.

BY DAVE HUNTER

The Bel-Ray combo is offered in a range of colored and textured coverings, including Tweed, Gator and an embossed style called Cowboy.

The Bel-Ray grew from Steve Carr's interest in the EF86 tube.

The cabinet is handcrafted In-house from cabinet-grade European birch ply.

THE CLASSIC BRITISH sounds of the '60s and early '70s have never fallen out of fashion, and it's hard to imagine they ever will. The real trick for many guitarists in the 2020s, though, is achieving the sound of a cranked and raging Marshall "Plexi," Hiwatt stack or Vox AC30 in a format that jibes with today's often restrictive playing situations.

It all comes together beautifully in the new Bel-Ray, a three-in-one tribute to the best of British tone from Carr Amplifiers. Proprietor Steve Carr is known for his uncanny ability to compact classic sounds into extremely portable packages, and the Bel-Ray is the latest of his seemingly magic presto-changos.

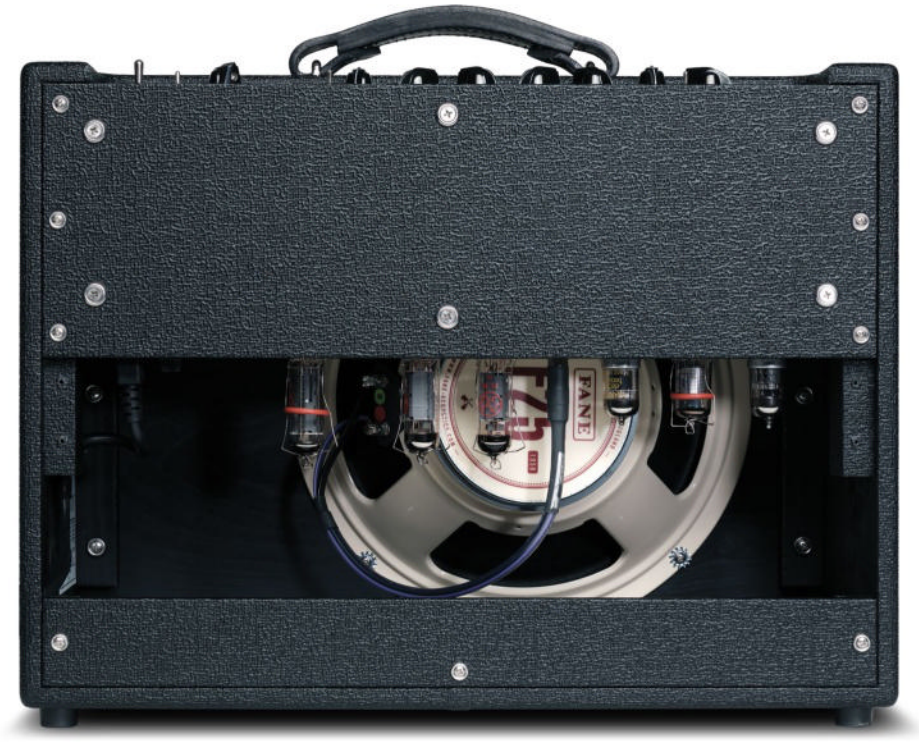
Onto the foundation of a 16-watt output stage driven by two EL84s with an EZ81 rectifier tube, the Bel-Ray grafts a three-mode front end that replicates these familiar voices from the late '60s and early '70s. The trio might seem to go against another line in the Carr ethos — uncompromising originality — yet the maker has gotten there in the past by following classic inspirations, and the Bel-Ray does so in a way that is still undeniably its own. Rather than simply cloning the circuits of the tonal targets, with switching to flip between them, Carr comes at it from a unique perspective, adapting gain and EQ stages using two 12AX7s and one EF86 pentode preamp tube to mimic the tones he's after.

"I needed a challenge," Carr tells *GP*, "and I had unfinished business with a wonderfully notorious preamp tube, the EF86. The EF86 pentode is a tube with a ton of character, more immediate than the omnipresent 12AX7, with wild energetic excitement, plus huge gain. In early 2023, I was considering a new model with loose Vox inspirations. The EF86 was used in the lower wattage early mid–'60s Vox amps — the AC4, AC10 and AC15, most notably — so it was back on my mind. The Bel-Ray grew from there."

In the Bel-Ray, the EF86 is used, rather unusually, as the final gain stage before the "concertina" phase inverter, following the 12AX7 in the first position and another used for the cathode-follower tone stack. And while this tube is often notoriously microphonic, as Carr mentions, he hasn't found it problematic in this position, a situation aided by the use of new-old-stock (NOS) Svetlana EF86s in all production Bel-Rays. (Carr notes that you might still hear some pinging sounds emanating from this tube when you tap the control panel or chassis, but he says this isn't an issue once you begin playing.)

Governing this clever circuitry are controls for level, followed by a three-position V66/H74/M68 voicing switch and dials for top, mid, bass, tremolo speed and depth, and the attenuator. The latter is coupled to a switch that delivers 16 watts in the up position for full power, or anything from two to zero watts with the attenuator kicked in. Another mini toggle alongside the level control selects high/low volume taper. In the up position, the signal hits the output stage full tilt, while in low it inserts a partial master-volume circuit to ease the assault.

The Bel-Ray is an excellent way to get three classic British tones in one portable combo.



The tube complement (top) features two 12AX7s, one EF86, two EL84s and one EZ81 rectifier. The control panel (below) is tidy and straightforward.

The Bel-Ray 1x12 combo cabinet is made from European birch ply and measures 21 by 16 by 8.25 inches. Complete with its Fane F25 12-inch speaker, it weighs in at a mere 34 pounds. The looks mark another feather in Carr's styling cap, too. My review sample was covered in dark-brown, faux-gator vinyl, contrasted by a grille cloth of brown and tan fleck, which niftily wraps up into the cabinet's top panel.

And the build is first-class all the way, from the heavy-duty leather handle and hospital-grade AC cord to the aviation-standard Solen electrolytic capacitors, carbon-comp resistors, U.S.-made Jupiter signal caps and custom transformers. Inside the chassis, it's all wired together in Carr's signature point-to-point construction, with components soldered directly one to the other with minimal use of supporting terminal strips and minimal excess wire as a result.

"Often, ideas like this sound simple, but in practice they can be very tough to implement," Carr tells us. "Each of these classic tone sections has a different component architecture, particularly the H73 setting, a left-field curveball when viewed through the Fender/Marshall circuit lens. It took many prototype iterations, listening at the bench and playing with a band to land on the best approach."

"IT'S NOT THREE CLONES BUT RATHER THREE *VIBES* THAT ARE BEING PRESENTED"

Even with the design goals fully realized, Carr amps often deliver fun surprises that present more character than the outward simplicity might imply. "The Bel-Ray's tremolo can get pretty crazy when turned up all the way," Carr explains, "especially with the speed maxed out. This circuit works by modulating the power tube bias and is similar to what you see in many '50s-era amps. It has a very deep swell, which can get wildly fun. I left in the extra quarter-turn of unruly tremolo as it is so wacky!

"Also, the high-low level taper toggle is interesting. When I was playing the Bel-Ray prototype at home, I often wanted the volume to come on really slowly so I could push effects into the amp while keeping the output low and hit harder on the strings late night. The built-in attenuator lets you tame the volume, too, but the high-low gives you a better low-volume clean tone for very quiet playing."

Testing the Bel-Ray with a Fender Telecaster and a Gibson Les Paul, plus a selection of overdrive pedals, I discovered a lively little combo with a surprisingly stout voice when pushed hard, yet the ability to sound very good when restrained in low-volume situations. As with almost every Carr amp I've tried, the Bel-Ray delivers an elusive blend of clarity and complexity. It always cuts through, but with a depth and thickness that lend character even to clean settings, while retaining articulation amid the heavier grind. As Carr points out, the most natural pedal platform is found with the volume taper switch in the low position, where a Wampler Tumnus Deluxe and Ibanez TS10 Tube Screamer merged seamlessly with the circuit. But nudging a semi-cranked Bel-Ray with overdrive on the high setting also proved a lot of fun.

While I enjoyed the playing experience right from the start, I think I got the most out of it once I stopped thinking of the voicing switch as offering direct access to Vox, Hiwatt and Marshall tones and began to consider it as presenting three different inspirations of those amps. As Carr says, "It's not a verbatim entire amp change to emulate these different sounds, it's more about grabbing the spirit of Vox, Hiwatt and Marshall. It's not three clones but rather three *vibes* that are being presented."

To that end, the Bel-Ray offers an impressively broad range of expressive, dynamic and inspiring tones, enough to excel at just about any vintage-voiced intentions a guitarist might have for a compact tube combo in 2024.

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The Jane Getter Premonition features (from left) Gene Lake, Paul Frazier, Adam Holzman, Getter and Alex Skolnick.

JANE GETTER CAN SHRED

But she'd rather bring soul and feeling to her guitar work. And she does, on ***Division World***, her latest album of genre-splicing creations.

BY ANDREW DALY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA HEATH

IN THE WORLD OF Jane Getter — a player who can outright shred but hates the notion — "redundancy" is a dirty word. For Getter, there's no fun in being a retread, nor does she care what's worked for her in the past, only what works for her now.

The trick is that she's guided by a muse that instinctually runs the gamut of styles. But if you were to ask Getter, she'd tell you her music is best classified as prog-rock, even though she disdains genre associations. "My taste in music is very eclectic, so my writing and playing reflects that," she tells *Guitar Player*. "My approach to combining those elements is organic. It's what I hear, and hopefully I'll execute it well."

And that brings us to the Jane Getter Premonition's *Division World* (Cherry Red), an aptly titled album, as Getter wrote it amid chaos inherent in a dissected global climate. "A lot of the songs are about conflict," she says of the record, which includes guest performances by guitarists Alex Skolnik and Vernon Reid as well as former Frank Zappa drummer Chad Wackerman and her husband, Miles Davis/Steven Wilson keyboardist Adam Holzman. "The divisiveness and political narcissism in the world bother me, and songwriting is the way I express that."

Getter refers to *Division World* as her "strongest album," and considering that songs like "The Spark," "Compass," "Division World," "Devolution" and "End the Blame," showcase her multi-genre approach, that seems fair. Still, she refuses to say she's found stylistic comfort, let alone a logical stopping point.

"Oh, I could never do that," she says. "But I wouldn't be here without what I did before. I'll never be able to answer the question of where my style is," she admits. "The aspects of my playing are in everything, from open voicings to the heavy distorted riffs. I'm all those things, and more."

You started out playing piano but ended up playing guitar. How did that happen?

I was given piano lessons as a young girl, and my sister was given guitar lessons, but I would

always spy on her, wishing I was taking guitar lessons. My parents finally gave in and gave them to me. I've always been drawn to the guitar. It continues to be an avenue of expression for me and brings me great joy.

What did the music scene look like when you were growing up?
Before streaming, record companies were into supporting evolving artists as they grew, instead of dropping them if their first album bombed. Record companies have become more corporate, with CEOs coming from the corporate world rather than the music world. My father-in-law and Elektra Records founder, Jac Holzman, always said, "It's all about music." I grew up with that in mind, but that focus has been forgotten.

Who were your early influences?
Before I got heavy into jazz, my influences were Bonnie Raitt, the Allman Brothers, Led Zeppelin, Crosby Stills & Nash, and Jimi Hendrix. And then I was exposed to Return to Forever, saw Joe Pass play solo and was blown away. I never imagined guitar could be played like that, and I said, "I want to do that." I got heavy into straight-ahead jazz and got my [*Gibson*] ES-175. My main jazz guitar influence was — and still is — Wes Montgomery.

Getter performs with her main guitar, a Peekamoose Jane Getter Model 1.

How did rock and metal enter the picture?
I was initially — and still am — inspired by John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Return to Forever, Jeff Beck, Robben Ford and Allan Holdsworth. But my writing style has recently been influenced by King Crimson, Tool, Porcupine Tree and Animals as Leaders. The earlier influences remain the foundation. Some take a back seat but will always be a part of me.

We know you like to meld genres, but is there one that best represents you?
If I had to pick one, I'd say progressive rock. "Progress" means moving forward and not sticking to any style. So when I'm asked, I say, "It's progressive rock, jazz, and metal." Some people have a specific idea of what prog-rock is, so I communicate that it's more than that. I don't like the idea of genres. I hope the music can speak for itself.

Are you primarily using your signature Peekamoose model? [*Getter plays a Peekamoose Jane Getter Model 1.*]
Yes. It's versatile, sounds great, and it's comfortable. I also use my '71 [*Fender*] Tele, '72 Martin D-28 acoustic and an '80s Ovation nylon-string. In addition, I have a '61 [*Fender*] Custom Shop Strat, a '53 Gibson ES-175, a Yamaha AC3MR acoustic-electric and a black Burns Marquee Pro guitar.

And how about amps and pedals?
My main amp is a Fuchs Audio Full House 50 with a 2x12 cabinet. I have a couple of pedalboards with a few different pedals, but my main ones are a Vox [*V847*] wah, a Maxon Overdrive [*OD-9*], a Fuchs Plush [*Extreme*] Cream II, a Fuchs Plush Drive, a Tone Concepts The Distillery [*preamp boost*], a vintage TC Electronic Chorus, a Diamond [*VIB1*] Vibrato, a JAM Pedals Delay Llama [*analog delay*], a Boss Digital Delay [*DD-7*] and a Boss FV30H volume pedal.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

Division World
"The Spark," "Compass," "Division World," "End the Blame," "Devolution"

Are you on the hunt for any new gear?
I've wanted a Les Paul for years, and still do. I've always loved the sound of Dumble amps and would love to have one. I'd also like to get a nice Taylor acoustic-electric. But I don't mind cheap gear. I use a Squire J-Bass for my demos, which sounds quite good. Real bass players have tried it and said it's a good bass. It depends on the instrument.

Can you dig deeper into your style and what it looks like now?
I'm playing better now than ever. My technique has improved, my approach is much more developed, and the execution of my ideas is more on point. Some of the harmonic and melodic ideas I've been working on for soloing are starting to creep into my playing organically. Years of experience and practice have brought me to where I am now, and I look forward to that continuing.

"I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO ANSWER THE QUESTION OF WHERE MY STYLE IS. THE ASPECTS OF MY PLAYING ARE IN EVERYTHING"

What does your riff and solo writing process look like?
My soloing process is to dig deep into the harmony and rhythm of a song or, depending on the song, its melody. The goal is to make a musical statement with melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and textural ideas.

You're often called a shredder, a label some players dislike. Does it bother you?
Many guitarists are playing incredible solos today, but there is a movement where some are too focused on playing as fast as possible and constantly shredding. That's not musical to me. I'm impressed by their technique, but I'd much rather listen to a solo that has soul and feeling than impressive chops. The best solos have a combination of soul, feeling and chops. Players concerned with only playing fast are missing the point and missing out on what music is. It's not a sport to see who can play the fastest; it's an art. So a bit of deconstructing can be constructive.

‘I’VE CHILLED OUT’

Famous for her fierce shredding on an eight-string Strandberg, **Sarah Longfield** aims for the middle ground on her forthcoming album.

BY ANDREW DALY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK SAMPSON

SARAH LONGFIELD HAS come a long way. After starting as an unintentional YouTuber in 2007 — when social media was far from being a breeding ground for young guitarists — she oscillates today between sharing stages with John 5 and Nita Strauss (in 2021 and 2023, respectively) and getting name-checked by Steve Vai after attending his Vai Academy 7.0.

“I was surprised and grateful to be invited to the Vai Academy this year,” Longfield tells *Guitar Player*. “Steve is an incredible player who has so much wisdom to share on guitars, as well as the music industry overall. I left feeling incredibly inspired. It was so much fun to hang out with the other great guitarists and witness their unique style and approaches.”

As for wisdom and style, Longfield has both in spades. After reeling off three impressive albums — *Collapse//Expand* (2017), *Disparity* (2018), and *SUM* (2019) — and several EPs, she found herself cast in the “fiercest shredder in the world” category. Since making the jump from YouTube to the self-produced, upper-echelon indie-metal pool, she’s become known for her two-handed tapping style and extensive use of her multicolored signature Strandberg Boden NX 8 eight-string, leading to tours with Marty Friedman, Angel Vivaldi and Polyphia.

Interestingly, though, since taking time away to pursue her college degree, Longfield’s approach to instrumental music has changed. “I’ve chilled out,” she says. “Don’t get me wrong — I still love shredding, playing fast, and challenging music, and that’s not totally going away, but this new set of songs I’m working on isn’t really that now. I’ve realized that I don’t actually love listening to most instrumental guitar music, so I’ve been trying to find a middle ground between stuff that is both fun to play and easy to listen to.”

As for what’s next for Longfield, she has a yet-to-be-named — and apparently very different-sounding — record written, recorded and in the mixing stage. It’s her first new solo music in four years and her first new music since she and Eric Collier released the single “Glimpse of the Finale” under the name Chrome Coda last November.

Longfield punts when asked when the record will drop, although she’s excited, even if she doesn’t entirely understand where she’s pulling inspiration from. “It’s so hard. I’m honestly not sure where it comes from,” she admits. “I believe that my songs come from a subconscious place where all my experiences, interests and influences merge. For me, songs tend to happen all at once. I don’t ever really sit on riffs for too long, and I don’t like to overthink my parts. If I make something that sucks, I just try and make something that doesn’t suck the next day.”

What inspired you to pick up guitar, and what keeps you inspired?
It was kind of an accident. I played violin in the school orchestra but quit when my favorite teacher moved away. A few years later, I got a guitar for my birthday and didn’t really like it until someone showed me a few Slayer riffs. That sold me! As for what keeps me inspired, it’s the constant stream of amazing new art and music that I get to see and listen to every day. I’m very grateful to be

Sarah Longfield with her Strandberg Boden Metal NX 8 signature edition guitar.

alive at a time when all of it is easily accessible.

YouTube was critical for you at a time when social media wasn't as popular a way to discover young guitarists.
It's funny, because I never really planned on doing YouTube. I'd made a couple of metal covers when I was 13 or 14, and then decided I was over it and spent most of my high school years focused on drawing. I tried and failed to get into college right out of high school — even the music colleges I applied to. [*laughs*]

How did it grow to the level it did?
When all my friends left for school, I got back into music, searching for friends and community. I started a band, and my drummer suggested getting back into making videos to help our visibility, so I did, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

Then I met [*popular YouTube guitarist*] Rob Scallon, a great dude. He inspired me to take YouTube more seriously. Our collaborations boosted my channel and introduced me to so many other creators. The community is wonderful, really. It's so unlike the rest of the music industry. People are genuine and eager to collaborate.

How do you view the rise of TikTok and Instagram for finding young guitarists?
TikTok and Instagram can be wonderful tools for exposure and community. But digital communities are so different from a solid, in-person network of people. I'm fortunate to have been a part of things before TikTok and Instagram Reels took off. Many young artists get discouraged because the comment sections on all platforms are somehow even more toxic than they were on social media five or 10 years ago.

Social media aside, do you have a solo or riff that you go back to when your inspiration well runs dry?
My all-time favorite solo comes from a song called "White Walls" by Between the Buried and Me. Paul Waggoner's playing has always been — and continues to be — very important to me. Paul is one of my biggest influences. He's so melodic and a joy to watch, so that solo is always super fun for me to play.

Of the solos you've written, which are you most proud of?
I would say that my favorite is from a song of mine called "Illuminate," which comes from my album *Collapse//Expand*. I like it because it's long and challenging to play. It's the type of solo where I need to focus to nail it. Even though I've been playing it live for six years, that level of focus never goes away.

"IF I MAKE SOMETHING THAT SUCKS, I JUST TRY AND MAKE SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T SUCK THE NEXT DAY"

To your point, that solo is from six years ago. So is it most indicative of the player you are today?
True. All the songs I've yet to release are the ones most indicative of the player I am today. I've spent the last few years taking a step back from music to go to college — not for music, though — and I've been focusing on loving life entirely outside of the metal, prog and guitar scenes. Doing that changed my writing and playing style in such a complete way. I'm more chill now. So this new material I'm working on will be much more laid back. It won't be constant shredding or even instrumental. I hope to play them live in the summer of '24, so we'll see how that goes over. [*laughs*]

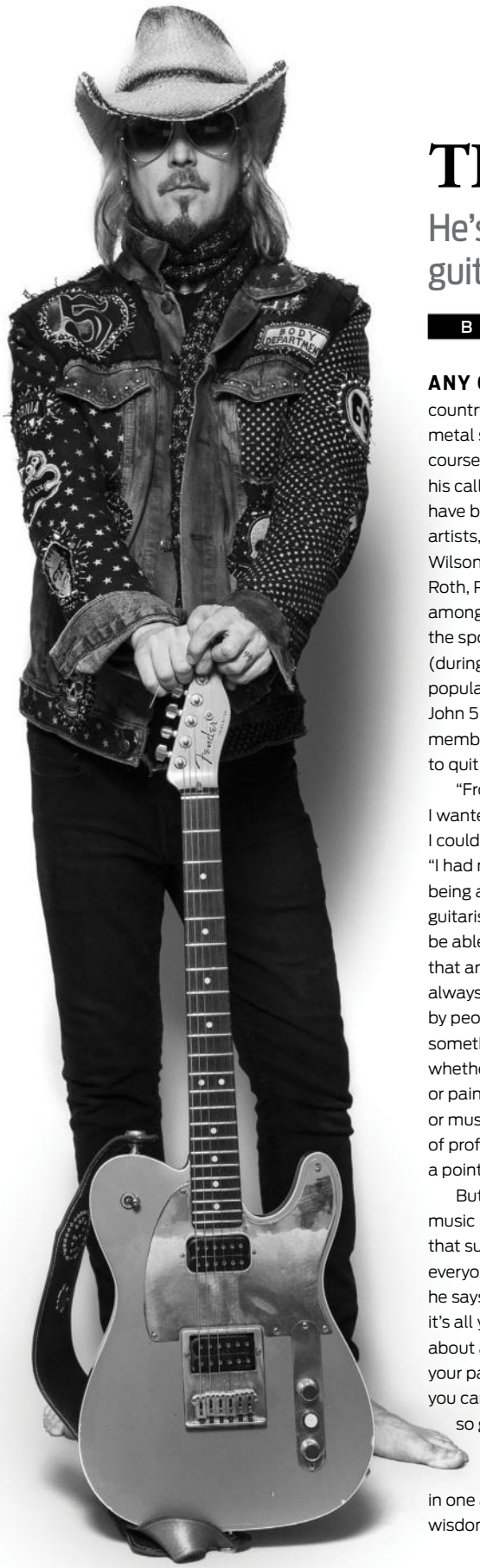
With that chilled-out mindset, how do you view the at times explosive and self-indulgent guitar music we hear today?
I think they still have their place. I do miss when pop songs had solos, not only guitar but on any instrument. I will always love hearing instruments get their spotlight.

I think all art, especially music, is self-indulgent, but not in a bad way. You *should* be making and playing music for yourself, right? But then again, if the goal of that self-indulgence is to get people to like you, to show off or to be famous, you'll never be fulfilled. Music is about communicating and sharing your inner experience with the world. Whether it resonates with anyone, though, isn't up to the artist.

What gear are you leaning on to aid in your exploration of new sounds?
I picked up a Neural DSP Quad Cortex [*floorboard amp modeler*] for my live shows, and it's been great so far. I love a handful of pedals for recording, but plug-ins have gotten to be so good in the past decade that they've become my go-to for recording. As for amps, I still have my Engl Powerball II [*100-watt tube head*], but amp modelers and plugins are so immediate and much easier on my back!

When you do spring for analog gear, where do you go hunting?
It has been quite a while since I picked up any new gear. Being in school full-time has put me on a tight budget both financially and with how much free time I have. That said, the Sweetwater Gear Exchange is awesome and a great resource for new stuff.

What's next for you in the short and long term?
In the short term, I aim to finish my degree and return to the grind with music. I've got a new record done, and it's being mixed as we speak. So I hope to drop it and tour as soon as it's done. And once that happens, I'd love to return to Europe and the U.K. again. As for the long term, honestly, I want to be able to keep making stuff, be it art, music, chaos — whatever.



TIP SHEET

He's played for countless artists. These are the guitar practices **John 5** considers most important.

BY JOE BOSSO

ANY GUITARIST WHO can combine country-style chicken pickin' and hypersonic metal shred is no one-trick pony. Over the course of his career, John 5 has made diversity his calling card, and his six-string services have been called upon by a wide range of artists, including k.d. lang, Marilyn Manson, Wilson Phillips, Lynyrd Skynyrd, David Lee Roth, Rick Springfield and Salt-N-Pepa, among others. Until recently, he held down the spot as Rob Zombie's ace guitar wizard (during which time he also issued a series of popular solo albums), but in late 2022 John 5 joined Mötley Crüe after founding member Mick Mars announced his decision to quit touring.

"From the time I picked up the guitar, I wanted to learn as many different styles as I could," John 5 says. "I had my heart set on being a being a session guitarist, so I wanted to be able to play anything that anyone asked. I've always been intrigued by people who could do something really well, whether it was in sports or painting or filmmaking or music. There was a certain level of proficiency I set for myself, and I made it a point to study as much as possible."

But while mastering multiple styles of music has worked for him, John 5 recognizes that such an approach might not be right for everyone. "You've got to do what you love," he says. "Maybe you're so into the blues that it's all you want to play, and you don't care about anything else. That's great – follow your passion. Be the best blues guitarist you can be. You know what's in your heart, so go for it."

Whether you're looking to be an "anything goes" guitarist or a specialist in one area, check out these choice pieces of wisdom from the Tele-totin' virtuoso.

1 PRACTICE – BUT MAKE IT FUN

"It's so important to make practice an enjoyable pursuit, especially when you're just starting out. Inspiration is key to having fun when learning an instrument. If you're a guitar teacher, instead of giving students some scales or 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' right off the bat, try to find out what they like. Maybe there's a student who's wearing an AC/DC shirt. Perfect! Teach him 'Highway to Hell' and watch his eyes light up. He'll be so excited that he'll never want to put the instrument down again.

"I'm kind of different from a lot of players, because I was just so obsessed with the guitar when I was starting out – and still am. I wanted to learn my lessons completely. Whatever was put in front of me, I wanted to have it down 100 percent. I sort of treated going to each lesson like I was going to play a concert. That's how I felt about it, and it was so much fun for me.

"YOU'VE GOT TO DO WHAT YOU LOVE. FOLLOW YOUR PASSION. YOU KNOW WHAT'S IN YOUR HEART, SO GO FOR IT"

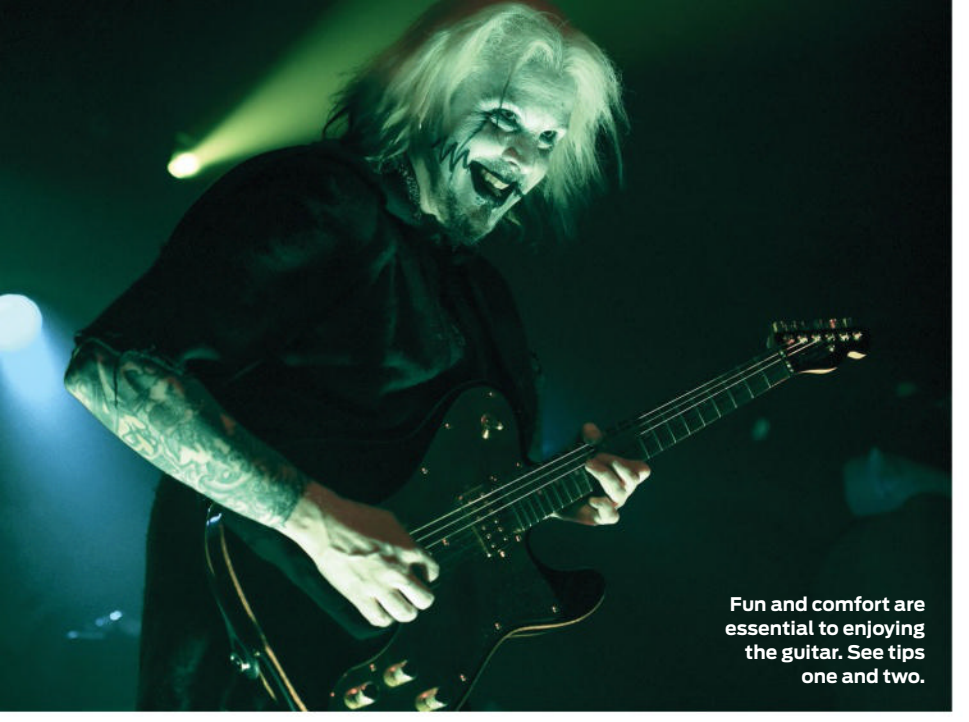
"Whatever helps you stay engaged and able to enjoy practicing, go for it. Nowadays there's so much content available — it's on Instagram and YouTube — so you can just scroll around and find stuff to inspire you."

2 PLAY THE GUITAR THAT FEELS COMFORTABLE TO YOU

"As soon as you can, find a guitar that suits your hands and feels right next to your body. You might absolutely love the look of a Les Paul but find you're more comfortable playing a Stratocaster. The guitar that feels right to you will be the one you connect with.

"This isn't very complicated. To me, it's no different than buying shoes. When you try on

ISRAEL PEREZ



Fun and comfort are essential to enjoying the guitar. See tips one and two.

shoes, you know pretty quickly which pair feels right. You walk around the store and you're like, 'Oh, my God. I'm going to wear these until they have holes in them!' Picking the correct guitar is exactly the same.

"I play a Telecaster. I first saw people playing Teles on *Hee Haw* — everybody was playing Teles. What's funny is, one Christmas I got a Stratocaster. I loved it, because Strats are great guitars, but I could tell right away there were things about it that didn't feel right. It just wasn't the guitar for me. As soon as I started playing a Telecaster, I formed an instant connection with it. Everything about that model felt like it was perfect for me. It's like when you find the right person to marry. You just know."

3 DO SOMETHING EVERY DAY TO FURTHER YOUR DREAM

"Time goes by so quickly. In the blink of an eye, days, weeks and months can disappear behind you. I know it sounds trite, but try to make every day count. If you want to get your music career going, you have to put in the work. Of course, you have to practice, but there's a lot more to it than that. At the same time, don't try to overwhelm yourself. You don't have to conquer the world in a day, but if you can do one thing out of the ordinary each day to further your dream, things will start happening, probably faster than you might think.

"Call other musicians and set up a jam. Call a venue and see if you can get a booking. Maybe contact a producer or a manager. Get yourself out there somehow. If you do that one thing each day, at the end of the week you might be further along than when you started. A week will turn into two weeks, and pretty soon you'll have accomplished a lot.

"When I was just getting going, I called David Lee Roth's people out of the blue. I wanted to further my career, so I got a number and called because I thought, Maybe they're looking for some music. It worked out, and that turned into a 30-year friendship.

"In some ways, things are a little easier now because you can put videos on the internet and get yourself seen and heard. But you still need to hustle. Again, take things step by step. Each day do something that you didn't do yesterday. You might not see the results immediately, but doing nothing will ensure that nothing happens."

Touring can take a toll. Stay healthy! See tip number four.

4 STAY HEALTHY

"This is something everybody should be mindful of, but it's especially important if you're a musician on the road, traveling from state to state, playing different countries and dealing with time changes, different foods, different water — different everything. Your body has to be in incredible shape, because getting sick on the road is no fun at all.

"There are some easy things you can do: Wash your hands, get sleep and watch what you eat. I learned this the hard way. One time, my stomach wasn't feeling so great, and Rob Zombie told me, 'You should try not eating meat.' So I stopped eating chicken. Pretty soon, I thought, Whoa, this is working, so next I took away turkey. Then I took away red meat, and honest to God, once I did away with all of that, I started feeling great.

"Good health improves everything in your life. It's good for your mind, your brain, your senses, your reflexes — you name it. And all of that is good for playing the guitar."

5 LEARN HOW TO READ A ROOM

"Imagine you're at the stage where you're going into an audition or a recording session. Ask yourself, Why am I here? The answer is, You're there to make an artist sound good, feel comfortable and not worry about anything. That means you're not there to play crazy solos over the songs. You're not there to upstage anybody and be all 'Look at me!'

"You need to learn how to read a room. Do your research on the artist you're playing for. Get to know the people you're going to be involved with. Take note of their mannerisms and personalities, and what kind of sense of humor they have. Are they in a good mood or a bad mood? Be observant.

"A certain amount of humility and maturity is necessary when you're playing with other people, especially if it's a recording session. Remember, you're there to do a job. Don't play too loud. Don't step on lyrics with solos or licks that get in the way. Be aware of people when they're talking. Don't interrupt. Listen. You don't need to always speak up. If somebody wants your opinion, they'll ask you what you think.

"You're probably wondering, Yeah, but when will it come time for me to shine and blow people away? The answer is simple: They'll tell you. Trust me on that."

SAM SHAPIRO (RIGHT); TIM MARCH (TOP)

One of B.B. King's "Lucille" guitars shares a display case with Bo Diddley's red Gretsch G6138.

AMERICA AT THE CROSSROADS

A new exhibit at **The MAX** explores the guitar's cultural impact through 40 historic instruments.

BY JIM BEAUGEZ

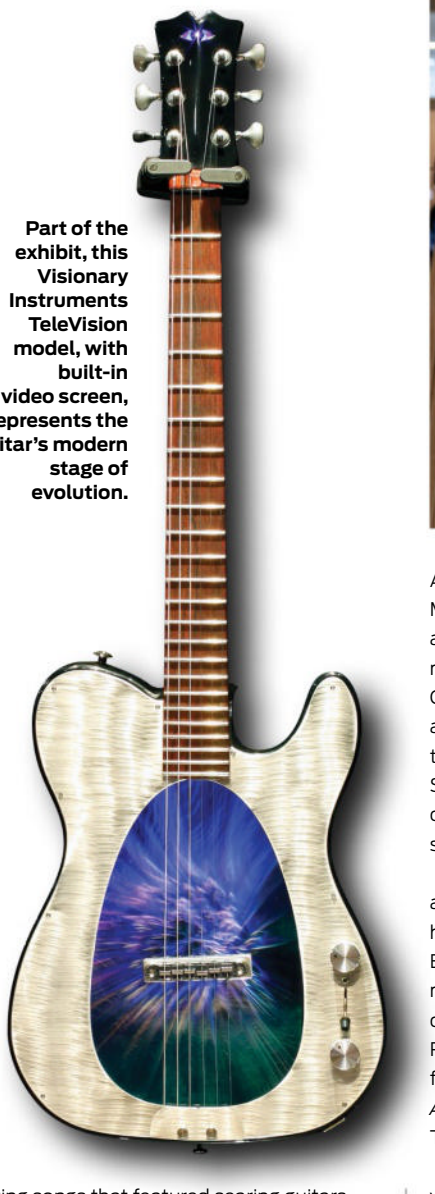
GUITAR PLAYERS AND enthusiasts will find a coterie of familiar faces adorning the Hall of Fame rotunda at the Mississippi Arts + Entertainment Experience (a.k.a. The MAX), an interactive museum in Meridian that honors the state's famed writers, actors, musicians and other cultural figures. As the structure ascends from the ground floor through the center's galleries and toward the open sky, the visages of Robert Johnson, B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Jimmie Rodgers, Howlin' Wolf, Bo Diddley, John Lee Hooker and Marty Stuart cast a message to visitors that's echoed in the state's tourism slogan: "The Birthplace of American Music." No state has a more solid claim to it than Mississippi.

"We're the birthplace of blues, country *and* rock and roll music," says Penny Kemp, president and CEO of The MAX. "And the guitar is at the core of all of it." Meridian itself has a hefty guitar legacy as the home of Rodgers, nicknamed the father of country music, as well as Peavey Electronics, which pioneered CNC technology in guitar making in the 1970s.

Beyond the museum's own collection of notable guitars — including Diddley's rectangular red Gretsch G6138, Hooker's Wine Red Gibson SJ-200, Waters' Gretsch Synchromatic and one of B.B. King's "Lucille" Gibson ES-355s — there are more reasons for guitar fans to visit this spring.

Through May 11, The MAX is hosting *America at the Crossroads: The Guitar and a Changing Nation*, presented by the National Guitar Museum. There, visitors can see 40 of the most important guitars ever made, from the National Guitar Museum's collection of 200 historic instruments, and learn how the instrument has impacted American history.

"The guitar kept showing up anytime you were looking at a huge cultural movement," says H.P. Newquist, founder of the National Guitar Museum. "Look at the Vietnam War. You had people like Hendrix and John Fogerty



Part of the exhibit, this Visionary Instruments TeleVision model, with built-in video screen, represents the guitar's modern stage of evolution.

A Martin D-28 with a tooled leather cover created by Martin for Elvis Presley's estate.

writing songs that featured searing guitars, emulating the sounds of bombs with them, and becoming emblems of the opposition to the war. And you had plenty of guys going off to war who were taking their guitars with them."

The story of the guitar in America dates to colonial times, beginning with explorers and settlers who brought their instruments with them across the Atlantic Ocean. By the late 1800s, guitars were parlor instruments to be played at home.

"Prior to World War I, women played guitar more than men did. The parlor guitar was designed primarily to fit a woman's body and hands and arms," Newquist says. "And then you move forward into the mid 1950s and you have people like Mother Maybelle Carter, who really invented their own style of strumming and picking that changed the sound of country music."

As guitars became more affordable through retailers like Sears, Roebuck and Co, African-American sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the South adopted the instrument and evolved blues music from spirituals and field hollers. Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Son House and other early bluesmen traveled from farm to farm, visiting plantations like Dockery and Stovall, where they entertained share-croppers with their homespun tales and slide guitar licks.

The guitar remained the driving force as blues gave way to rock and roll in the hands of Ike Turner, Chuck Berry and other Black artists on the chitlin' circuit, but this new music wasn't strictly a gentleman's club. As in the parlor days, women like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Cordell Jackson were fierce guitarists. The multimedia portion of *America at the Crossroads* shows how much Tharpe brought to the stage.

"Rosetta Tharpe should have been the very first person ever inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame," Newquist says. "She did a better job at ringing solos out of that guitar than a lot of people we give more recognition to today."

"WE'RE THE BIRTHPLACE OF BLUES, COUNTRY AND ROCK AND ROLL, AND THE GUITAR IS AT THE CORE OF ALL OF IT"

In showcasing its many guitars, the exhibit emphasizes the instruments' authenticity over the hands that played them. A Rickenbacker Electro A-22 "Frying Pan" provides an introduction to the electric guitar era, while models like the Fender Stratocaster and Gibson Les Paul segue to the rock and roll explosion, and a venerable Martin D-28 speaks to blues, folk and protest music.

Visitors will find curiosities, too. One of H.P. Newquist's favorite guitars in the exhibit is a Soviet-era Tonika model that traveled across the Atlantic and reached the museum intact, despite being wrapped in just a garlic sack for protection against the elements and other hazards of shipping. Its origin story illuminates another piece of American history.

"In the Cold War, American goods weren't sold in the Soviet Union," Newquist says. "Youth were listening to pirated radio, and they wanted to play guitar but they couldn't import them. So they created instruments they thought looked like a Stratocaster but which really look like a copy of a copy of a copy. You can't plug it into anything modern."

Back at home, Peavey Electronics founder Hartley Peavey, who built his first amplifiers a few blocks away from The MAX, adapted computer-controlled routing technology for the guitar-making process for the Peavey T-60 model, thereby vastly increasing the number of guitars that could be made while making consistency a priority. A T-60 prototype is part of the exhibit.

Performances by artists like Pat Metheny and Super Chikan, as well as workshops around guitar making, will be on tap during the exhibit's run. Visitors can also enhance their visit by engaging interactive modules in The MAX's permanent exhibits that give an even fuller picture of the guitar's role in the story of America's music.

"All the blues artists are heavily represented in the Juke Joint gallery, where visitors can learn more about each artist's origins, inspirations and collaborations," Kemp says. In addition to sampling their music, visitors can form their own virtual band in an interactive exhibit. On guitar? The options are Diddley, Hooker, King and Waters — a dream team no matter who they pick.

REVERE PHOTOGRAPHY (MARTIN D-28)

MY CAREER IN FIVE SONGS

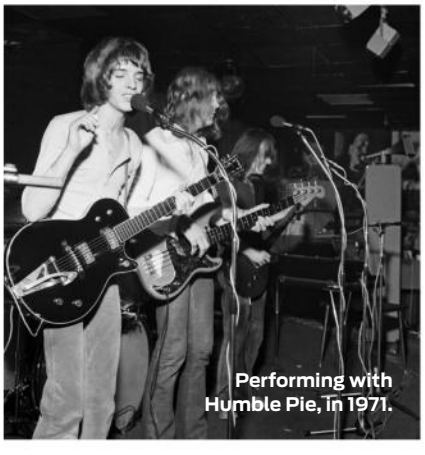
"Putting a song together can be quite painful." **Peter Frampton** reveals five tracks that were worth the hurt.

BY JOE BOSSO

WHEN PETER FRAMPTON co-founded Humble Pie in 1969, he was already regarded as one of England's hottest guitarists, but his songwriting skills hadn't yet blossomed. He contributed a number of strong cuts to the four studio albums he recorded with the band during his brief, two-year tenure, but it wasn't until he turned solo and began issuing his own albums, starting with 1972's *Winds of Change*, that his compositional chops began to equal his skills as an instrumentalist.

"I can't say I always enjoy the process of writing," he says. "I do like coming up with bits — a riff or a chord pattern. Sometimes a title comes to me that sparks something. But putting a song together and actually finishing it can be quite painful, especially when it comes to writing lyrics. That can take a while. It isn't until I've got the whole thing down and I've got a little demo version of a song that I can feel enjoyment."

In 1976, Frampton's monster-selling concert recording, *Frampton Comes Alive!*, was something of an unofficial greatest-hits collection, containing the tastiest gems from his previous solo albums, among them, "Show Me the Way," "Baby, I Love Your Way," "Lines on My Face" and "Do You Feel Like We Do." Although the two-disc set spent 10 weeks atop the U.S. *Billboard* 200 albums chart, none of its singles hit number one. At the height of his fame in 1977, Frampton came this-close to that mark when the title track from his studio album *I'm in You* reached number two on *Billboard*'s Hot 100.



Performing with Humble Pie, in 1971.

"Everybody thought 'I'm in You' would hit number one because the live album was enormous," the guitarist tells *Guitar Player*. "It was the lead single from *I'm in You*, which certainly isn't my favorite album or anywhere near my best, but it's a great song and I thought it deserved to be a hit.

"The truth is," he continues, "I never thought about chart positions and things like that. After I left Humble Pie in 1971, I didn't give any thought to having hits. That just wasn't what I concentrated on. I was more concerned with being inspired, and writing good songs and making sure they were recorded right. My attitude was, 'Do I like the song?' It always came down to that."

After announcing that he was suffering from a progressive muscle disorder called IBM (inclusion body myositis), Frampton embarked on a 2019 "farewell tour," which fortunately didn't live up to its billing. Last year, he came out of retirement and hit the road on his Never Say Never tour, which he's extended into this year. Meanwhile, he's combing through demos and planning a studio album of all-new material, but as he jokes, "I'll probably be 86 by the time it comes out, because I'm such a perfectionist."

Here he shares the stories behind five key tracks from his storied career.

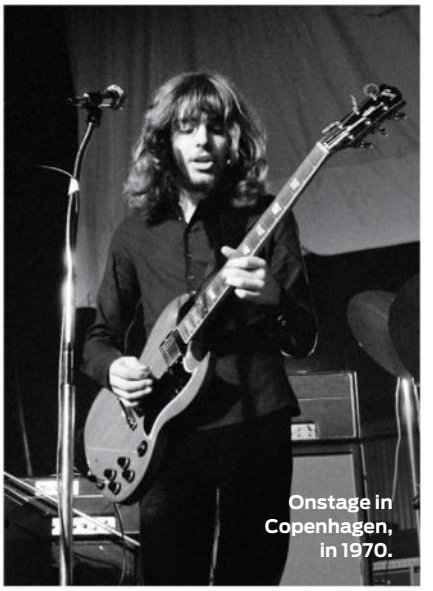
TRINITY MIRROR/MIRRORPIX/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (1971); GUITARIST MAGAZINE (TOP)

"STONE COLD FEVER"
HUMBLE PIE — *ROCK ON* (1971)

"I came up with the opening riff the night before a rehearsal. I played around with it on an acoustic — it sounded kind of Zeppelin-esque. We were all influenced by them. In fact, if we were recording at Olympic Studios, we would often hear Zeppelin. To get to the mix room, we'd have to walk through the control room of Studio A. I'd see Jimmy Page sitting there, overdubbing in darkness.

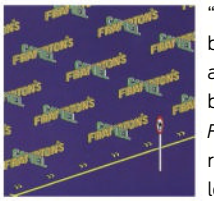
"Anyway, I recorded the riff on a Sony recorder and I brought it in to play for the guys. We were rehearsing at this place in the country — Magdalene Laver Village Hall. The second Steve Marriott heard the riff, he jumped on it right away. He loved it. We started arranging the song pretty quickly. I remember we would go into the kitchen to have a cup of tea or light up a joint — 'course, I wasn't smoking then. Quite often we'd all come up with our words for verses, but for this song Steve wrote the whole thing. He did all the vocals.

"We had the song down before we started recording. It was a very special session for me, actually, because I played a very long solo at the end — it goes into a jazzy, almost freeform kind of thing. I tracked it live with the band, and then we went in the control room to listen back. I didn't say anything to the band, but as I heard my solo I got this feeling in my stomach, and I thought, I don't think I'm copying anybody else anymore. I really believe this is me for the first time."


Onstage in Copenhagen, in 1970.

"THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I USED A TALK BOX IN THE STUDIO. I'D USED ONE LIVE BUT NEVER RECORDED WITH IT"

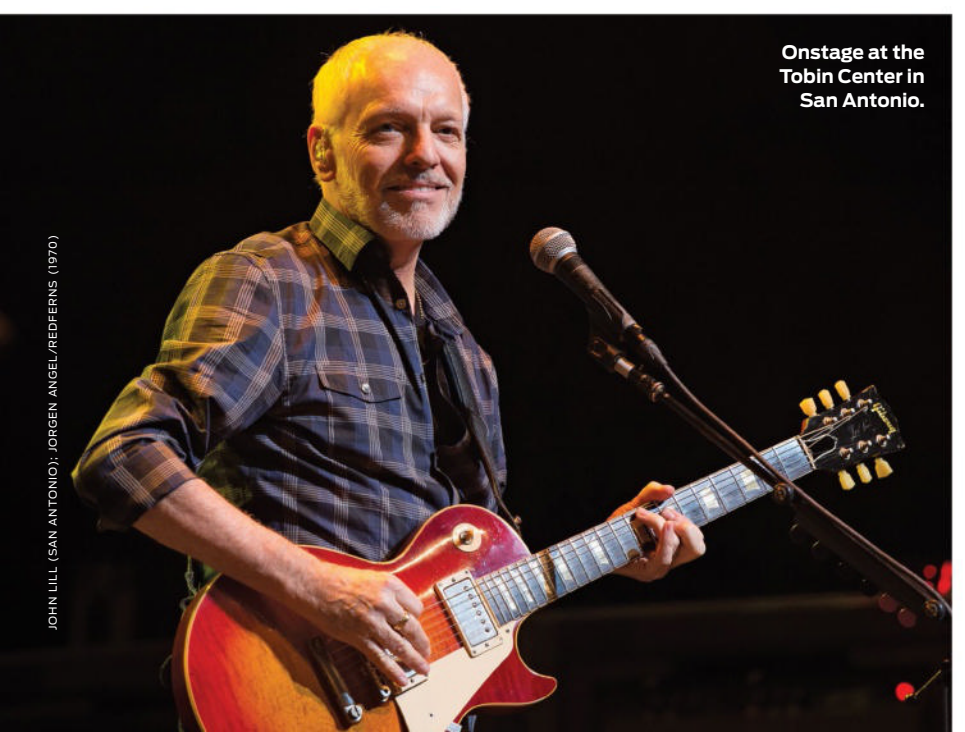
"LINES ON MY FACE"
PETER FRAMPTON — *FRAMPTON'S CAMEL* (1973)



"My marriage was breaking up. It was a very sad time, and basically the whole *Frampton's Camel* record is about lost love and wanting someone back who doesn't want you. I wrote the music to 'Lines on My Face' in Manhattan. I was staying at my manager's place on Park Avenue. I had a Martin D-45 that I bought at Manny's, and with that I wrote the music and melodies. But I needed a quiet place to write the lyrics, so a good friend of mine, Frank Carillo, a wonderful guitar player and singer, said I could stay at his place on Long Island. Frank's mom kicked his brother out of his room so I didn't have to sleep on the couch. I sat on the bed and wrote the lyrics.

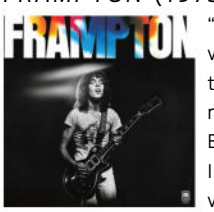
"Before we started recording, my drummer exploded, as usual, so [*engineer/co-producer*] Eddie Kramer gave me names of the best session guys in New York City. The only one who answered his phone was John Siomos, who turned out to be one of the best and most unique drummers I've worked with. 'Lines on My Face' was the first song we did. It was me, Frank Carillo, Rick Wills on bass, Mick Gallagher on keys and John on drums. Frank played a D-35 and I had my D-45.

"For the electric parts, I used my '54 Les Paul — the one everybody knows as the Phenix. I remember we spent a whole day getting sounds, and Eddie Kramer was getting ready to leave. I told him I wanted to cut the solo, and he said we only had 25 minutes left. I said, 'It won't take long,' even though I didn't have anything worked out, which I never do. I never work out my solos in advance. What you hear on the record is one take."

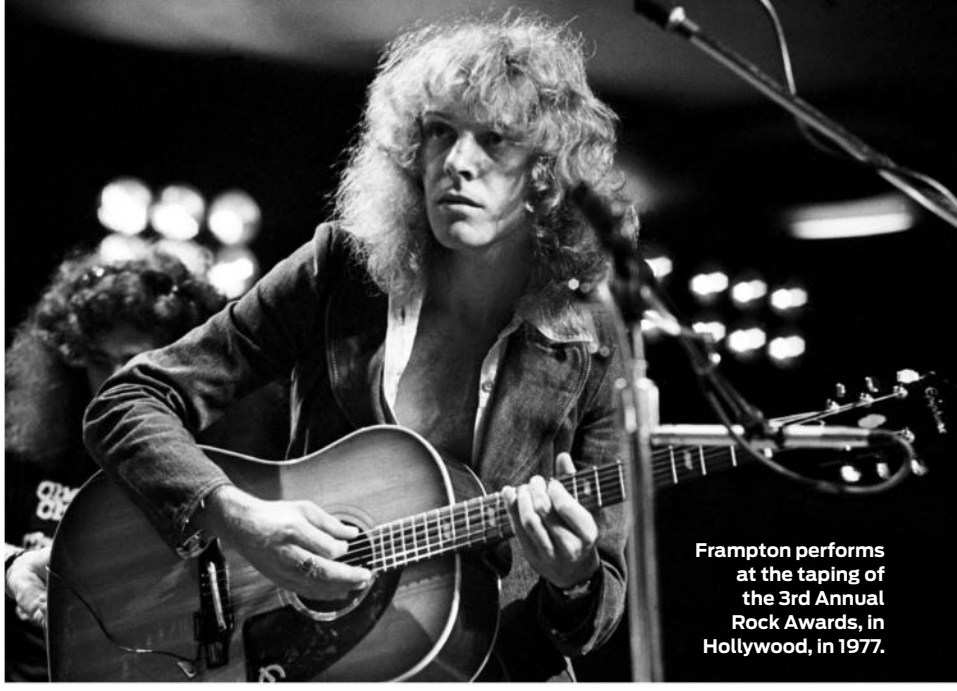

Onstage at the Tobin Center in San Antonio.

JOHN LILL (SAN ANTONIO); JORGEN ANGEL/REDFERNS (1970)

"SHOW ME THE WAY"
PETER FRAMPTON — *FRAMPTON* (1975)



"I had three weeks to write before we started the album, so I took my Les Paul and an Epiphone acoustic and I went to the Bahamas, where I stayed at Steve Marriott's cottage on the beach. I ran into Alvin Lee and his wife, and we spent two weeks hanging out and having way too much fun. Thank God I had eight days left after they



Frampton performs at the taping of the 3rd Annual Rock Awards, in Hollywood, in 1977.

left. On my first day to myself, I picked up the Epiphone, tuned it to open G, and within 20 minutes I had most of the music and melodies to 'Show Me the Way.'

"I put the guitar down and said, 'I've got to write.' I started singing 'show me the way.' The words just came out — I was in the moment. As I'm doing this, I'm thinking, What am I trying to say? But the words came easily and they fit, so I kept going. I put down what I had on my Sony CF-550A [*boom box*]. It felt pretty good.

"The band recording went smoothly. We did it as a three-piece: me, John and my old cohort from the Herd, Andrew Brown, on bass. This is the first time I used a talk box in the studio. I had been using one live since '73, but I never recorded with it. Nobody was around except Chris Kimsey, the engineer, so we experimented with it and we loved it. It's a very clean talk-box sound compared to the way it sounds on the live record. On *Frampton Comes Alive*, we were a four-piece, so everything sounded bigger.

"'Show Me the Way' got tons of play on KSAN in San Francisco. That station jumped on the *Frampton* album — it was *Frampton* all the time. That's why we recorded the live album at Winterland. San Francisco was our town. They were way ahead of Detroit and New York."

"BREAKING ALL THE RULES"

PETER FRAMPTON — *BREAKING ALL THE RULES* (1981)

"I was going through old tapes of jams because I wanted to do a real rock and roll–type track. I found this jam of me and John Siomos and thought it sounded great. It was like we were doing the Stones. As I listened, I thought, No, it's more than that. John was just kicking ass. The riff was pretty powerful, so I finished up the music, and there it was.

"I was working with David Kershenbaum as my co-producer, and we talked about making a very live-sounding rock record. We recorded at a sound stage on the A&M lot. It was a blast cutting tracks. I had John Regan on bass, Arthur Stead on keys, and I had half of Toto: Steve Lukather on guitar and Jeff Porcaro on bass. We played like a real live band, and every time we did the song it kept getting better and better. Playing with Luke was scary. [*laughs*] He's such a lovely, crazy man.

Frampton plays the O2 Shepherds Bush Empire, in 2013.

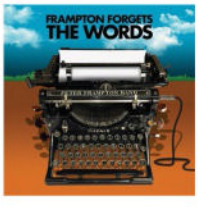
"I HEARD MY SOLO AND GOT THIS FEELING IN MY STOMACH. I THOUGHT, I REALLY BELIEVE THIS IS ME FOR THE FIRST TIME"

"I had lost my Les Paul by this time, so I used one of the very first Roland synth guitars. Actually, Luke had one too, so he showed me what it could do and what you could do with it. I didn't demo the solo, as usual. It was all cut live, very spontaneous.

"It's a pretty vicious song, and we felt like we needed strong lyrics, so I sent a cassette to Keith Reid. He was such a brilliant lyricist. We spoke on the phone and I told him what I was looking for, and he sent me back more than enough lyrics for a song — it was like a book. David Kershenbaum and I went through it and picked out all the lines that fit best. It was great. To think Keith and I did it all by mail. We didn't have Zoom then!"

"DREAMLAND"

PETER FRAMPTON — *FRAMPTON FORGETS THE WORDS* (2021)



"I watched a documentary on Jaco Pastorius and I couldn't believe that I hadn't done a 'thesis' on him before; that's what I call it when I go deep into somebody's playing. I started to listen to everything he did, and I became so enamored of him. Sure, he could play fast, but his sense of melody was something else.

"I called my keyboard player and band leader, Rob Arthur, and I said we had to do Jaco's 'Dreamland.' We got together and put down a click while I played Jaco's parts on guitar. I inhabited the melody, which I love to do. I didn't even have to think about it. After we finished it, we did the blues album [*2019's* All Blues], so once that was done I told Rob that we needed to revisit 'Dreamland.' We put the band on the track, but I didn't change anything about my guitar. What you hear on the record is what I did on day one. I used my '60 'Burst on the neck pickup.

"I've spoken to Jaco's son and brother, so I feel like I know the family a bit now. When I finished the album, I sent it to Andrew Brown. He's been my buddy since I was 16, and he's played in my band. After he listened to the album, he emailed me and wrote one word: 'Dreamland.' It meant a lot to me that someone I respect so much would pick that one song."

MARK SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES (1977); CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE (2013)

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The Bonni Pink finish is based on that of a guitar made for PRS employee Bonni Lloyd.

The Pink of Health

This 1989 **PRS Custom 24 "Bonni Pink" Signature** is a testament to the early success of Paul Reed Smith's shop.

WHEN AMERICAN GUITAR brands suffered a dip in quality during the 1970s and '80s, the door was open for guitar rivals to make inroads to the U.S. market. While many of them came from Japan, at least one homegrown guitar maker saw his "in": Paul Reed Smith. With his PRS Guitars, Smith hit the ground running in 1985, creating widely acknowledged "modern classics," and he's been accepted as another of the United States' leading guitar makers ever since.

The 1989 Custom 24 featured here was built just a few years after PRS established proper production but before its guitars were commonplace in dealerships across the country. Not only is it a classic from the maker's "golden era" but it wears a rare Bonni Pink finish that comes with its own story.

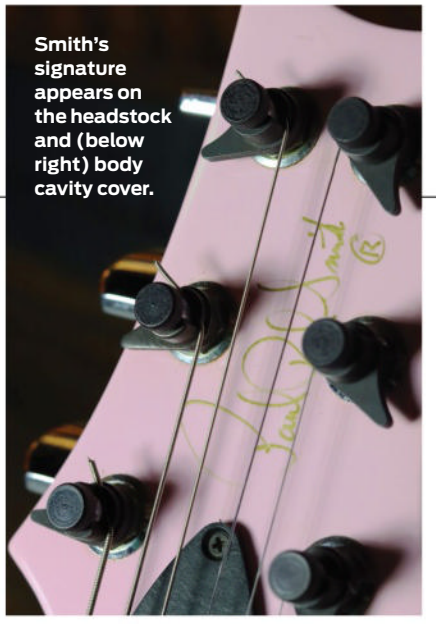
Having played guitar in his youth, Smith built his first guitar in 1975 while in college, an adventure that inspired him to drop out and work full-time as a luthier and repairman. A boatload of research and experimentation went into the effort over the next 10 years, during which he built an average of one guitar a month until funds were in place for him to open the first PRS factory, in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1985. But shortly before then, the budding entrepreneur had tested the waters by buttonholing roadies at backstage doors, guitar in hand, to get touring stars to check out his work. The effort succeeded and proved the viability of Smith's designs. He quickly received preproduction orders from such stars as Heart's Howard Leese, Peter Frampton, Al Di Meola and, eventually, Carlos Santana, allowing the PRS factory to fire up with a substantial artist roster in place.

This so-called Sweet Switch rolled off high frequencies to avoid potential harshness.

Although they're familiar to most guitarists today, the features of Smith's core design were innovative. Significant among these were:

- **A hybrid Fender-meets-Gibson ethos** that ran throughout the design, affecting both styling and build;
- **A glued-in neck** with hybrid 10-inch fingerboard radius and 24 frets;
- **Optional bird inlays** in the rosewood necks (often Brazilian rosewood until around 1990);
- **A 25-inch scale length** that made it easy for players of other makes to adapt readily to PRS guitars;
- **Versatile five-position rotary switching** with pickups wired to access both

GUITAR COURTESY OF WELL STRUNG GUITARS. PHOTOS BY PAIGE DAVIDSON



Smith's signature appears on the headstock and (below right) body cavity cover.

BY DAVE HUNTER

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

- Asymmetrical double-cutaway design
- Solid mahogany body and neck with Brazilian rosewood fingerboard
- Carved Artist-grade figured-maple top, bird inlays
- Floating six-point milled PRS-Mann vibrato system
- PRS Treble and Bass humbucking pickups
- 25-inch scale length with 24 medium-jumbo frets
- Master volume, five-way rotary selector, Sweet Switch and three-way toggle switch

humbucking and single-coil tones;

▪ **A back-angled headstock** with a three-to-a-side tuner layout designed to enable a straight string pull over a low-friction nut, to maximize tuning stability;

▪ **A floating vibrato bridge** that stayed in tune with liberal use, as requested by Santana;

▪ **Highly figured maple tops in faded sunburst finishes**, as seen on some of the most prized late-'50s Les Pauls.

It all added up to a thoughtful redrawing of the electric guitar's blueprint, one that applied logic and creative design principles to the matters of playability, tone and tuning stability, rather than merely copying the classics that had come before. In addition to the attractive top woods, PRS carefully selected the mahogany he used for the guitars' backs and necks while making the body backs slightly slimmer than those of the Les Pauls they partly resembled. The resulting lighter weight, along with a rounded contour in the ribcage position, made the guitars more comfortable to play than many of the set-neck, single-cutaway creations of the day, which were often quite heavy.

THE EXTREMELY FLAMEY MAPLE TOP AND PRS AUTOGRAPH MARK IT AS ONE OF THE EXALTED SIGNATURE MODELS

Introduced in 1985, the Custom 24 was PRS's cornerstone model, and it embodied all the significant features detailed above, plus others. A more upscale Signature Series (hand-signed by Smith) was offered from 1986 to '90, and carried the ultimate woods and appointments. After some 1,000 examples, this upgraded line was renamed the Artist Series, and has since evolved through several iterations.

The distinctive Bonni Pink finish on our featured 1989 Custom 24 Signature Model was based on an early guitar rendered in the same aesthetics for Bonni Lloyd. A PRS employee, Lloyd worked in artist relations and marketing for Smith prior to the company's establishment and again between 1986 and '99. The extremely flamey maple top and Paul Reed Smith autograph mark this example as one of the exalted Signature Models, while the distinctive finish makes it a rare — and highly alluring — early PRS by any measure.

Another characteristic of early PRS guitars is found in that small mini-toggle switch, which partnered the master volume control with the rotary pickup selector (the latter can be easily mistaken for a tone control in these photos if you didn't know otherwise). PRS dubbed this the Sweet Switch, and it was designed to re-create the so-called tonal "sweetening" of the treble roll-off that is experienced when a long cable is used from guitar to amp. The two-way switch was wired for bypass in one direction, while the other took the signal through a 135-nanosecond delay line, a small rectangular component that effectively attenuated the high frequencies sent on to the output jack. The intention was to overcome the potential harshness of a guitar run through a wireless system or a buffered signal chain, but some later players found the "sweet" setting rather dull and lifeless, and PRS replaced this switch with a conventional tone control in 1991.

Examples of recorded PRS tones can be found all over the place, and the company has comprised a roster of artists to rival those of Fender and Gibson. In addition to the names already mentioned, proponents of various renditions of the classic PRS sound include Dickey Betts, David Grissom, Mark Tremonti, Orianthi, Dave Navarro and a host of other pro players far too numerous to mention. As for the "classic" PRS sound, the chameleon-like versatility of these guitars makes it impossible to confine that to any easy definition.

BY JIM CAMPILONGO

West Coast Funk... With Legs

Fifty years on, *Betty Davis* stands up to repeat listens.

MY FRIEND ANDY HESS and I were reminiscing about how amazing the Bay Area music scene was in the '70s and early '80s. There was Tower of Power, Malo, Santana with Neal Schon, Larry Graham, Sly Stone, Merle Saunders, the Pointer Sisters, Pete Escovedo at Cesar's Latin Palace, Sylvester, and Journey before Steve Perry. The club Larry Blake's had a great blues scene, as did the South Bay over at the Saddle Rack, while the Oakland music community was vibrant and diverse with artists who pushed the musical envelope while performing some of the best funk ever played by human hands.

Among the many performers in that scene was Betty Davis. The second wife of Miles Davis, Betty was about two years divorced from the trumpeter when she cut this self-titled album in 1973 for the Just Sunshine label. The record wasn't a big hit, but reissues by Light In the Attic have helped to bring Betty some of the attention she so richly deserves, while they give us a chance to hear the early work of great East Bay players of that era who appear on this debut, including Neal Schon and Larry Graham.

BETTY DAVIS LETS US HEAR THE EARLY WORK OF THE ERA'S GREAT EAST BAY PLAYERS, FROM NEAL SCHON TO LARRY GRAHAM

Betty is less a singer and more an animalistic messenger, taunting the listener as she oozes sexuality from one track to the next. We meet her on side one's opener, "If I'm in Luck, I Might Get Picked Up," where the band plays a fantastic monolithic funk-rock groove. Betty leaps out of the speakers, an unapologetic badass singing, "So all you lady haters, don't be cruel to me / I said I'm vampin', trampin', you can call it what you wanna." Neal Schon kicks off "Walking Up the Road" with a great funky intro as the drums establish the downbeat on this hypnotic riff, over which Betty sings, "I'm walkin' up the road / I'm gonna uplift your soul." "Anti-Love Song" has the extraordinary Larry Graham grooving and basically inventing slap bass, while Schon's wah lines complement the lyrics. Betty's performance is understated and personal as she whisper-sings, "I know you could have me shaking / I know you could have me climbing the walls / That's why I don't wanna love you..." The funk boogaloo "Your Man, My Man" closes side one, with Betty telling off another woman with whom she shares a two-timing lover. Betty Davis was really something!

Side two gets off to a fast and rocking start with "Ooh Yea." Betty sings her sexually impressionistic lyrics — "Do you want it? (Ooh, yeah, yeah) / Do you need it? (Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah)" — with such honesty that the content never feels manipulative. It's just Betty being herself. A good example of her empowerment is on my personal favorite, "Step-in In Her I. Miller Shoes." "She could've been anything that she wanted / She had bells from her head down to her toes," Betty sings. "Instead she choose to be nothing!" Betty's message has empathy, a warning and a subtext that this isn't going to be her fate. It's followed by "Game Is My Middle Name," a great riff rock/funk tune on which Betty plays the submissive predator. The album closes with "In the Meantime," a stylistic departure on which she delivers a hint of Sam Cooke and the Impressions, Betty Davis style: "I don't have no one that I can make love to / I don't have no one to satisfy me / But in the meantime I'll make do what I have." Although the written lyric might reflect otherwise, I hear this as a song of inspiration and hope. Betty is celebrating being alive.

Betty Davis is a great record from the long-gone era of equality, feminism, sexuality and accepting who you are. Those times weren't perfect, but when I listen to *Betty Davis*, I feel what freedom really is: the right to be who you are, not who you're told to be.

Look for the release of Jim Campilongo 4TET's new album, She Loved the Coney Island Freak Show, *in July 2024.*

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‘I HAD TWO TOTALLY DIFFERENT SOUNDS’

Electric guitar ace **Tinsley Ellis** feared he would lose his chops during the pandemic. Constant practice led to his new — and, surprisingly, solo acoustic — album.

BY GARY GRAFF

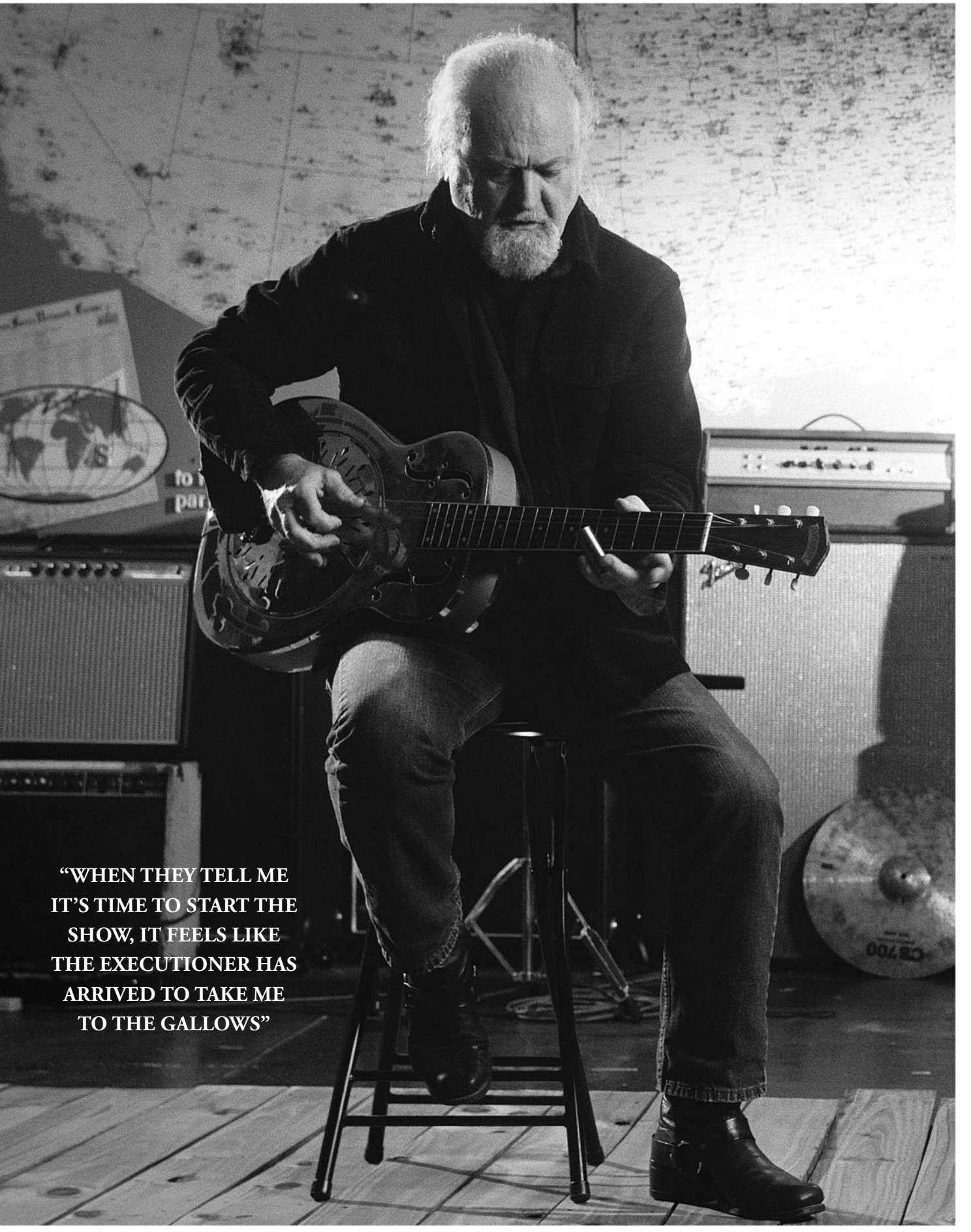
TINSLEY ELLIS KNOWS he’s “always been a pretty high-voltage electric” guitar player, at least since he was recording with the Heartfixers back in the early ’80s, and certainly during the 36 years since he signed with Alligator Records as a solo act. But the idea of a solo acoustic album — which he released in February as *Naked Truth* — has been in Ellis’s head for almost all that time.

“I’ve been threatening to do it for almost 30 years,” he says from his home in his native Atlanta, where Ellis recorded the 12-track collection of originals and covers using his 1969 Martin D-35 and a 1937 National O Series steel guitar, which he plays with a brass slide. “On a couple of occasions, I had asked [*Alligator founder*] Bruce Iglauer what he thought of the idea of me doing an acoustic album. He goes, ‘Well, those kinds of things work much better when the artist is famous.’

“I said, ‘*Everything* works better when the artist is famous,” Ellis adds with a laugh. “So I finally just did it on my own.”

As with many creative endeavors of the past few years, the pandemic was the

JORDAN PILGRIM



“WHEN THEY TELL ME IT’S TIME TO START THE SHOW, IT FEELS LIKE THE EXECUTIONER HAS ARRIVED TO TAKE ME TO THE GALLOWS”

impetus. "I was so afraid of losing my chops that I turned my studio into my day job," Ellis explains. "I went downstairs and began writing and recording every morning, starting at six or seven, with a cup of coffee, of course. The studio became my new instrument.

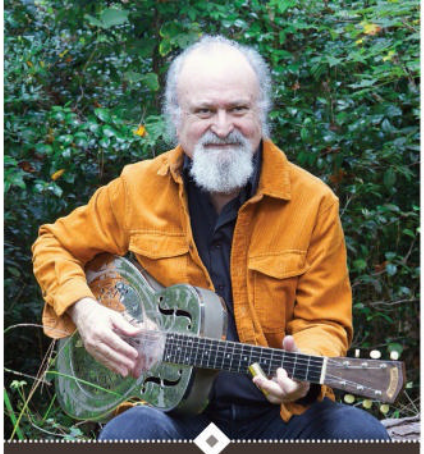
"I did a lot of these acoustic songs, and I would collect them in a file, and I started looking at that file going, Y'know what? I've got more than enough songs for an interesting acoustic album! I think the allure was just to do something different." Ellis also notes that a great many of his electric songs over the years were written on acoustic guitar in hotel rooms while on tour. The big difference this time was keeping them acoustic rather than translating them into electric trio, or larger, settings.

The acoustic sound, Ellis explains, is what really snared him during his woodshedding. "I had two totally different sounds, acoustically," he says. The Martin was a high school graduation gift from his father. "When I told him I wanted an acoustic guitar, he was thrilled with the possibility of getting me an instrument that wouldn't deafen the family, like my Les Paul and Twin Reverb I played all the time," Ellis recalls. When they bought it, he was told the guitar was made in the last year Martin used Brazilian rosewood. Ellis acknowledges that the information "may have been a hard sell. I can't tell you I could hear the difference, but he made me feel like I was really getting something special, so that completed the sale."

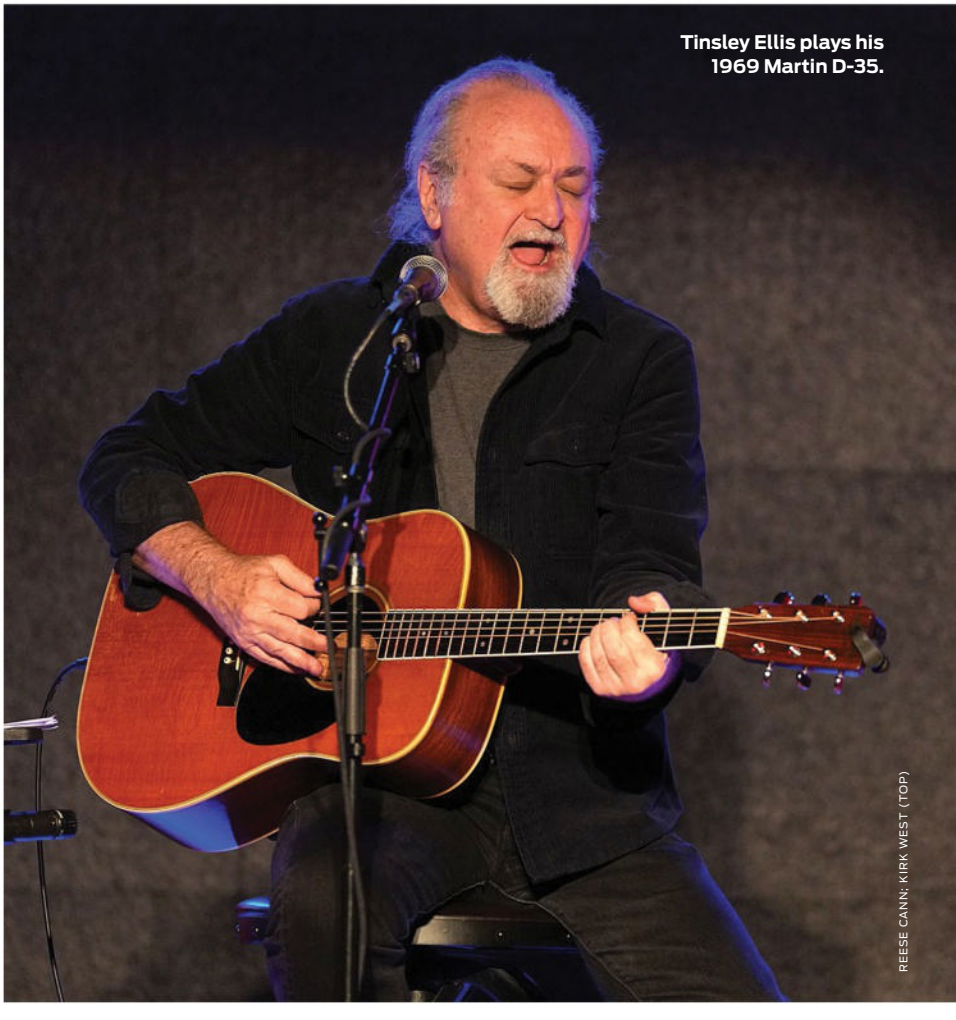
He bought the National, meanwhile, later in his career, at Willies American Guitars in St. Paul, Minnesota, "after browsing for one for a decade." He chose it from a circle of five set on the store's floor. "It had the most growl to it," Ellis says of the guitar, which started life with a square neck that was swapped out, but is "still the largest guitar neck I've ever had. Recently, somebody at a show came up and said, 'Y'know, Keith Richards had a resonator like that.' I thought that was an interesting, fun fact."

Iglauer checked off on the idea for *Naked Truth* and weighed in on its direction, primarily by urging Ellis to write more of his own songs for the set. "Initially, I had an equal amount of covers and originals, and he steered me toward doing originals," says Ellis, who penned all but the three covers of Son House's "Death Letter Blues," Willie Dixon's "Don't Go No Further" and the Leo Kottke instrumental "The Sailor's Grave on the Prairie." "I think that is probably what made the record pleasing, at least to my ears. If you go in and do, say, a Freddie King song, you're always gonna be judged against the original and you're never really gonna come up with your own voice as much as you would when you write the material and go into it with no preconceived notions.

"I also didn't want to just make a blues album where I was parroting the sound of Son House or Muddy Waters or Fred McDowell. I wanted to add my other love, acoustically, which is the folkier side: Leo Kottke, dare I say Stephen Stills, Jimmy Page open-tuning things. So it's kind of a blues and folk album, and it's kind of a slide National steel and a wooden-body guitar album."

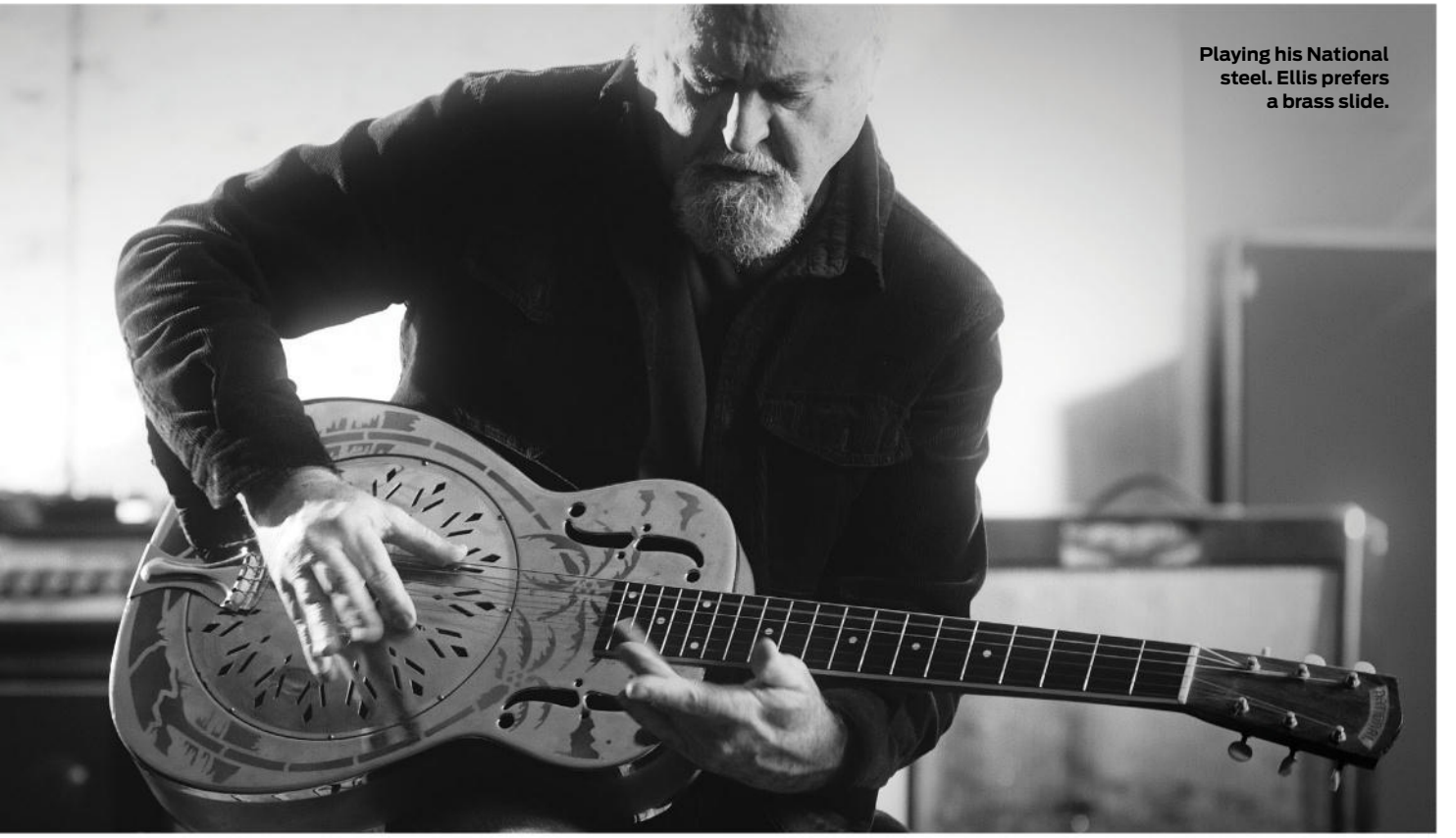


"NO MATTER WHAT KIND OF MUSIC I'M PLAYING, I LIKE TO HAVE AN EDGE"



Tinsley Ellis plays his 1969 Martin D-35.

REESE CANN; KIRK WEST (TOP)



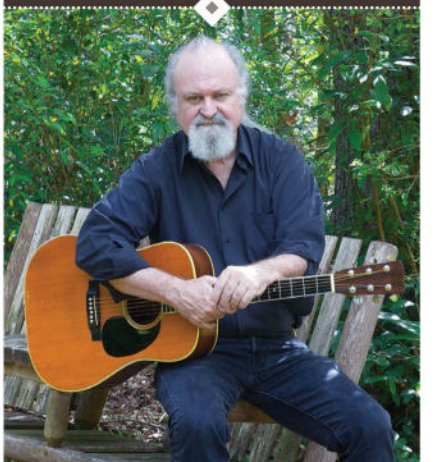
Playing his National steel. Ellis prefers a brass slide.

Those influences were nevertheless in play as Ellis was finding his *Naked Truth*. "No matter what kind of music I'm playing, whether it's slow or fast, major, minor, acoustic, I like to have an edge," he explains. "I really love the stuff that Son House played, watching those videos of him where his picking arm is just really flailing. Bukka White, the same thing. And carrying into rock music there's Pete Townshend, one of the best right hands ever in guitar.

"So there's a lot of right-hand work on the album, which is good because I've got six different tunings on this record, so there's a lot of open-string usage. That means the right hand needs to be doing more interesting stuff."

The National steel songs on *Naked Truth* are all finger-picked, Ellis says, as is "Easter Song," a quick (1:52), gentle closing instrumental played on the Martin. On the tune "Alcovy Breakdown," he says, "There's that sort of Stephen Stills–influenced thing where I used the Drop D tuning so I get that real low drone on the open D string." For another instrumental, "Silver Mountain," Ellis employs DADGAD tuning as a nod to Kottke and Page. "There's a whole lot of strumming on that," he notes. "Then there's some songs where I'm really bearing down, like 'Don't Go No Further.' I'm really trying to make it sound like there's a bass player as much as I can. I mean, I got to watch Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf play. I was able to sit at their feet, actually, and one thing I noticed is they really bore down when they played. Then about half the songs on the album have a pretty pronounced foot stomp in 'em — 'cause there's got to be a beat."

"I GOT TO WATCH MUDDY WATERS AND HOWLIN' WOLF PLAY. I WAS ABLE TO SIT AT THEIR FEET, ACTUALLY"



Ellis previously incorporated acoustic sets into his concerts, but last year he began playing all-acoustic shows, which he admits has been a challenge. "Oh, it's a whole different bag playing by one's self. 'Terrifying' is a word that comes to mind," he says. "I can't rest on the bass and the drums. When they come and tell me it's time to start the show, it feels like the executioner has arrived to take me to the gallows. But by the time the second song kicks in, it starts feeling right.

"Over 40 years ago I asked John Hammond about playing solo. He said, 'Tinsley, if you can do it, you should do it.' I think what he's talking about is just the freedom to turn on a dime. If I want to, I can throw in a Bob Dylan or a Leo Kottke song. I do enjoy that aspect of it."

Ellis plans to be doing those shows — what he calls his "two guitars and a car tour" — throughout the year in support of *Naked Truth*. He also talks about what he'd like "to build on for the next one," implying another acoustic release, but he won't commit to that — or anything specific — at the moment.

"I continue to write, electrically, too, so who knows what I'll do next," Ellis says. "I'm gonna ride this one as long as I can."

JORDAN PILGRIM (TOP), KIRK WEST (RIGHT)

Gary Clark Jr. holds his Gibson Custom Shop ES-355 in Cobra Burst finish with Bigsby.

BLUES BREAKER

With his new album, blues guitarist **Gary Clark Jr.** shows a dizzying range — from jazz-pop to funk to shred. But as he tells *Guitar Player*, he was never a blues guy to begin with.

BY JOE BOSSO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX CRACE

JPEG RAW IS Gary Clark Jr.'s first post-pandemic album, but its origins date back to the 2020 lockdown, when the guitarist, like every other musician on the planet, was forced to scrap his tour plans and await a return to normal life. "It was a weird time," he says. "The world was shut down, and I didn't know what I was going to do. I was hiding out in L.A., just waiting for kid number three to come. There wasn't much else to do, so I started making beats and playing guitar. Somehow I found myself listening to things that I hadn't paid much attention to growing up."

In the same way that he immersed himself in rock and the blues as a young guitarist, Clark dove head-first into the world of 1990s guitar virtuosos. As he explains, "When I started on guitar, my friend Eve taught me about the blues, and I learned about rock from my friend Gilberto. He introduced me to guys like Slash and the whole G3 thing — Steve Vai, Joe Satriani and Eric Johnson. During the pandemic, I was bored and I thought, What if I studied that? I basically turned into a teenager again. I locked myself in a room and started shredding guitar."

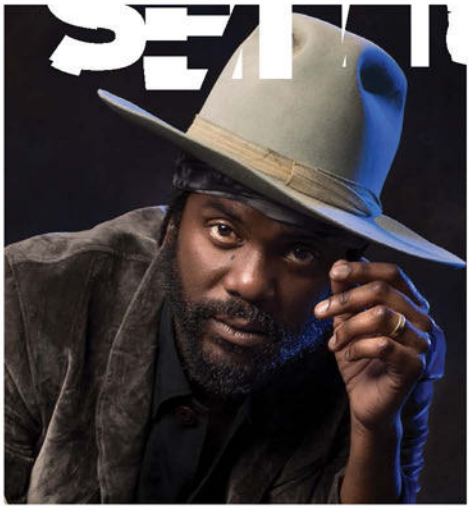
Armed with a Floyd Rose–equipped Ibanez, Clark cranked up the distortion and woodshedded triads and "funky weird scales" while watching videos of Steve Vai's "For the Love of God" and

Eric Johnson's "Cliffs of Dover." And he had a blast. "I was doing whatever I wanted," he says. "I wasn't worried about being Gary Clark Jr., or whoever everybody thinks they know. I was just being the guy I know."

By now, listeners should know better than to ever even try to pigeonhole Clark. Ever since he made his debut in 2012 with the album *Blak and Blu*, he's freely mixed elements of blues, R&B, rock and hip-hop on records that featured his bold and expressive guitar playing. His last album, 2019's *This Land*, took his stylistic influences even further, adding splashes of reggae, psychedelia and punk to the menu. *JPEG RAW* (it's an acronym for Jealousy, Pride, Ego, Greed, Rules, Alter Ego and Worlds) is his most diverse album yet. At times it's like a collision of moods and styles, sounds and textures. And it's impossible to predict from one song to the next where he's headed.

"Maktub" (named after the Arabic word meaning "it is written") is a chaotic rocker that comes on hard and heavy with a hyper-distorted riff that just won't quit. The album's title track blends '70s soul, a New Jack swing groove and tasty blues guitar lines, but in the blink of an eye it's overtaken by a bruising indie rock stomp that recalls the White Stripes in full bloom. Tumult is the name of the game on the tough-as-nails funk rocker "This Is Who We Are," a collaboration between Clark and alt-pop/electronic artist Naala, on which the guitarist tears out a wildcat, fuzzed-out solo.

As a palate cleaner, "To the End of the Earth" is a delicious, unexpected surprise. Luxuriously clean guitar lines and buttery chords wrap around Clark's velvety vocals on a jazz-pop love ballad that stands out like a beam of light. And at a minute and half, it's over much too soon. Having guested on Stevie Wonder's 2020 single "Where Is Our Love Song," Clark rejoins the music icon on the funky gem "What About the Children," contributing co-lead vocals, squawking wah lines and spirited soloing. Another legend, George Clinton, turns up on the spacey, hallucinogenic



"I BASICALLY TURNED INTO A TEENAGER AGAIN. I LOCKED MYSELF IN A ROOM AND STARTED SHREDDING GUITAR"

"Funk Witch U," which sees the guitarist's dirty tone mangled and magnified into something otherworldly. The nine-minute album closer, "Habits," is a musical Cuisinart featuring lush pop, waves of electronic rhythms and symphonic sounds, Townshend-like acoustic strumming, and elegant soloing on both electric and nylon-string guitars. Fearless, adventurous, filled with moments of beauty and madness (and mad beauty), it's a stunning statement from an artist operating at the peak of his powers.

Working with longtime co-producer Jacob Sciba, Clark brought both new and returning faces into the studio, among them his right-hand rhythm guitar ace Zapata, keyboardists John Deas and Elijah Ford, bassists Mike Elizondo and Alex Peterson, and drummer JJ Johnson, with an eye toward group collaboration. "I was really into getting a different perspective this time," he says. "I liked how everybody worked with one another and how we came together to create something. It was exciting. It was like we were making a movie. I could get into different characters while singing, evoking emotions that I'd never done before."

Despite all of his stylistic leaps, there is something about the public's perception of him that dogs Clark. As he points out, "I was presented as a blues guitarist. But *I* never said that." Undoubtedly, his backstory made for compelling reading — how, as a young player, he jammed with the likes of Jimmie Vaughan and Hubert Sumlin at the famed Austin blues club Antone's, and how he was picked by Eric Clapton to perform at Madison Square Garden at the 2010 Crossroads Guitar Festival. With these kinds of bona fides, it's no wonder that critics leapt over themselves to crown him as a new blues messiah. The tag has held through the years, and he's hoping *JPEG RAW* will set the record straight once and for all.

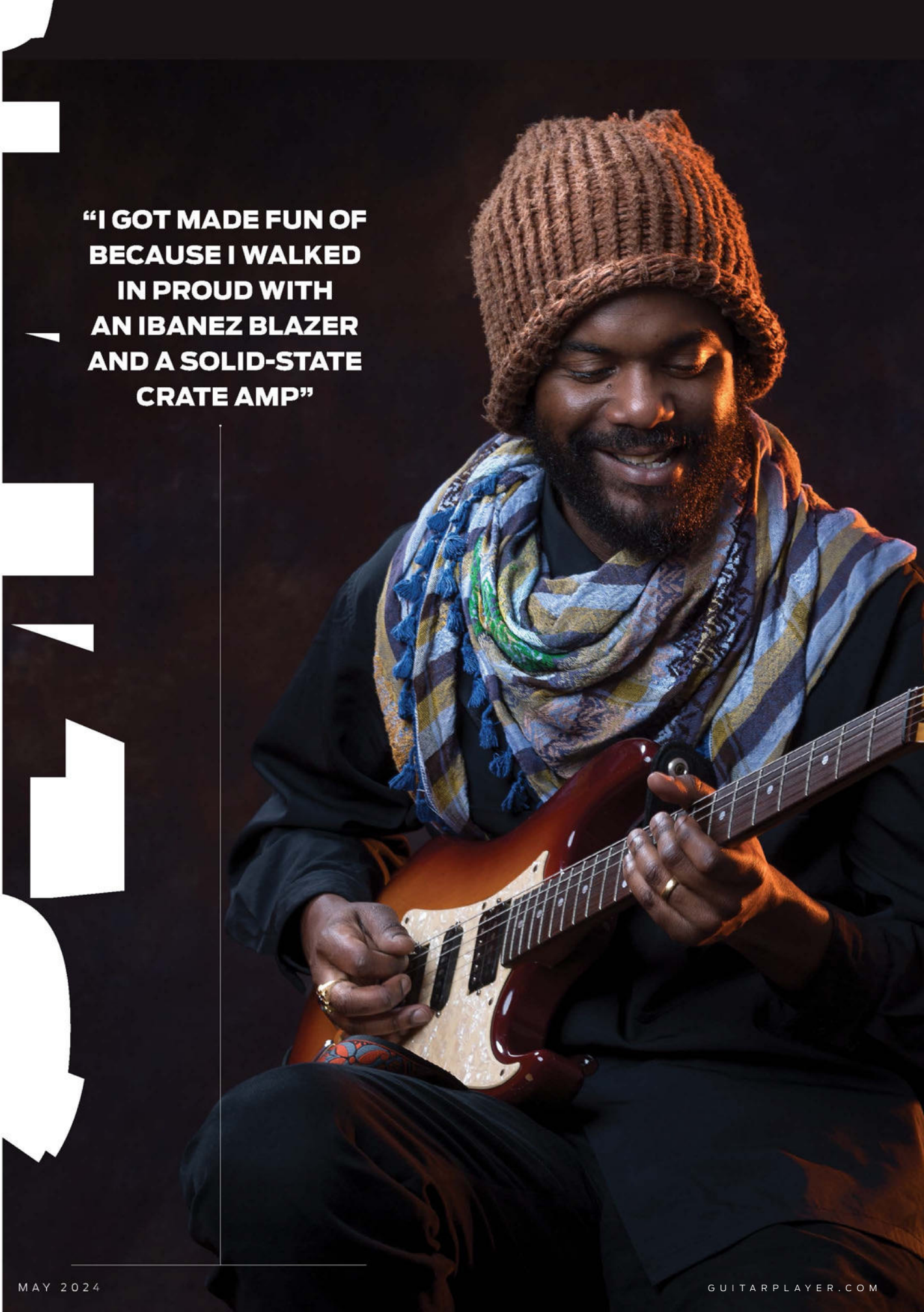
"I remember my first tour of Australia and seeing my posters plastered everywhere," he says. "It was cool but also devastating, because it was like 'Gary Clark Jr. — the new Hendrix.' I was like, Fuck, man. You're not even giving me a chance to be anything but a blues guy or a rock-star guitar player. My records have been presented as blues, but I've never made a traditional blues album. I've always had hip-hop influences and made beats. I've always had rock influences. I've played all kinds of music since I was a kid. I've had trumpets and saxophones and violins and bagpipes, just because I'm interested in music. I don't care about genre. I like how music makes me feel."

I know you aren't married to genres, but you do mix them up in interesting ways. The way you treat '70s soul on the new album feels both forward-thinking and nostalgic. As you get older, do you find you reach for nostalgia?

I don't know if I'm necessarily reaching for nostalgia as I get older. I think of all that music from the '70s — the soul and R&B and funk — it was the soundtrack to my childhood. It was there from the time I was born to when I moved out and I took my parents' records with me. I just loved that stuff so much. It's always felt relevant. I'm a big hip-hop fan, and that music is ingrained in me. It's followed me my whole life.

Clark poses with one of his Gibson GCJ Flying Vs with three Gibson Custom Shop P90s.

"I WASN'T WORRIED ABOUT BEING GARY CLARK JR. I WAS JUST BEING THE GUY I KNOW"


“I GOT MADE FUN OF BECAUSE I WALKED IN PROUD WITH AN IBANEZ BLAZER AND A SOLID-STATE CRATE AMP”

Clark's first guitar, this '90s Ibanez Blazer was a gift from his mother and is strung with D'Addario Custom Nickel Roundwounds.

You mentioned how you got into shredding during the pandemic. How do you feel it affected your approach on the album?
Instead of having these internal thoughts — What if I did this? What if I did that? — I just did things unapologetically. During the pandemic, everything was shut down. I didn't know what the world was going to be like or if music was over. I just did things for me and because I liked it. Same with the guys in the band — we didn't know what was going to happen.

Was shred guitar frowned upon when you were young and playing in blues clubs?
Oh, sure. When I was coming up in Austin, you wanted to be part of the cool club. There was this one club that was very strict about what they would allow.

Shredders weren't welcome, right?
Not at all. I got made fun of because I walked in proud with an Ibanez Blazer and a solid-state Crate amp. I was showing up to blues clubs with that, and they were like, "What the hell are you doing?" But you know, at a certain point you can't please everybody.

Your lyrical content frequently dips into social commentary. It was all over your last album, and you're definitely making a statement with songs like "This Is Who We Are." Do you ever hear from fans who trot out that standard line, "Shut up and play your guitar"?
Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, some of my favorite artists are the ones who encouraged me to do this: Marvin Gaye, Bob Marley and the Wailers, Stevie Wonder, Sly and the Family Stone. I come from that thing of putting something in your music to make you feel it. Jimi Hendrix's "Machine Gun" blew my mind. I was like, "Oh, shit, you can do that?" Psychedelic badass music that tells a story, or sometimes it's just an observation of things that aren't necessarily so pretty in life — I'm there.

Are you generally a fast writer? Do tunes come to you easily, or do you have to labor over them?
"To the End of the Earth" came quick, but all the other songs took a long time to write. Musically, there's no problem. The band comes in, we get an idea and we knock it out. Got it. The musical process is fun and easy, and that keeps the energy going. My lyrical writing thing wasn't happening. I like to be around people. I like to be out in the world and observe. In the middle of the pandemic, I wasn't watching things happen, and I was like, What do I write about? I had to go search internally for things that were real to me.

I also had conversations with the guys in the band, and I talked to Jacob Skiba. We'd talk about what was going on in our lives, and it was like, All right, this isn't just observational mode; this is digesting-what's-going-on-in-our-lives mode — which is quite scary. Writing has never been quite that personal to me. I kind of find ways to broaden the story so it can be more relatable. This one is really direct.

More than on your previous albums, the predominant guitar sound on this record is maximum overdrive and totally rude. [*Clark laughs*] Did you have a go-to guitar and amp combination for that sound?
I had a Gibson 355 that I used. At Arlyn Studios, they've got a 100-watt Cesar Diaz amp that I'm trying to buy, but it's a no-go on that. I used that quite a bit. I can't take all the credit for some of the sounds you're referring to. That's my guy Zapata. We've been playing music together since high school. He studies tones and sounds. The guy is dialed in. He can make a guitar sound like anything.

I take it that you two collaborate a lot on guitar parts while writing and recording?
Yeah, sure. On this record, the guys in the band were kind of a new crew. We were writing stuff together and bringing ideas in to jam on. Zapata's role was writing riffs and bringing big tones to kind of balance out my more subtle jazz influences. We wanted loud riffs. On "Hyperwave," his guitar sounds like an electric piano. Whatever he does sonically, it just feels right. I'm like, Cool. That's the flavor to put on this.

How do you respond to each other as players? Is there a push and pull?
If he's doing long legato stuff, I'm doing comps and short rhythmic hits. If he's holding down the comps, I'm doing the riff or I'm playing a solo. It's like a push and pull, sort of a dance. But not just with him — it's with everybody.

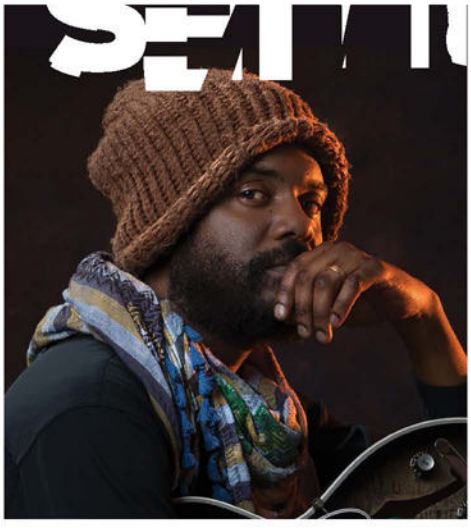
The massive, earth-moving fuzz riffs on "Hearts on Retrograde"...
That's all Zapata. He came up with the riff and was like, "What do you think?" J.J. played the drums, Elijah was on the bass, and I was like, "Yeah, let's see what we can do with that." I was running the board, recording everything. I learned how to work with Pro Tools. They laid that one down on the floor and I added my parts afterward.

Talk to me about how you collaborated with Stevie Wonder on "What About the Children."
Yeah, he hit me up and sent me a demo: "I got a song for you." It was him mumbling some words and playing a harmonium. He was like, "You think we can do something?" I said, "I'm in the studio with the guys right now. You want me to try and put something together?" So we did and I sent it to him. I asked him if he would sing on it with me. And not only did he sing on it, he sang his ass off! [*laughs*]

You play a great solo on the song's outro.
Thanks, but honestly, he sang over the outro and I was telling everybody to take my guitar part out. It felt unnecessary, but I guess it's kind of cool. I was like, Stevie Wonder is singing and mashing on the gas like that — I need to get out of the way. But we kept it in.

The song has a bit of a "Boogie on Reggae Woman" feel to it.
Oh, absolutely.

The wah guitar licks you play throughout sound so perfect with Stevie's voice. Did he encourage that kind of approach?
You know, I just went for that. It was an instinctual thing, and it felt right. I didn't even really think twice about it.



"I DON'T CARE ABOUT GENRE. I LIKE HOW MUSIC MAKES ME FEEL"

I brought up your use of distortion, but "To the End of the Earth" is quite different. What lovely clean tones on those chords and lines! And your singing is gorgeous. The song evokes a spirit of early 1960s jazz-pop.
Oh, thanks. I was hanging with Mike Elizondo. He's such an amazing producer and musician. He played me [*1963's*] *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*, and I fell in love with that sound. I started singing like that around the house, and I picked up the guitar and kept at it. I was just playing. I don't feel schooled in any one style, but I'm definitely influenced by Wes Montgomery and Grant Green. All those guys — Charlie Christian, Lonnie Johnson.

Guitar and amp-wise, what are you using on that track?
That's my 355 and a Fender Vibro-King. I didn't use pedals. I just reverbed it up.

I've got to be honest — I've got a beef with you about that track.
Uh-oh!

It's a fantastic song, beautifully rendered, but it cuts out after a minute and a half. What the hell, man?
[*laughs*] That was all I had. I would've done more, but I just didn't have it.

There are a couple of great solos on "This Is Who We Are": one in the middle of the song, and another in the ride-out. Overall, there are fewer guitar solos than on your previous records.
I just wanted to present music, and I think people have gotten used to hearing my songs and just waiting for a guitar solo. I'll tell you, I kind of get bored with myself playing guitar solos. It just seems… I don't know… a little gross.

"Gross"? But you're the guy who was just woodshedding to the G3 guys!
[*laughs*] I think if a certain song calls for a longer solo, that's fine. But I don't think putting a minute-and-a-half guitar solo into a song is going to do it any justice. To me, it's not going to serve the song. I mean, it *might*. Now, the thing is, the record is the record, but the fun thing about being with a band and playing live is those things can change and we can play that guitar solo for 10 minutes if we want. You know what I mean? But when I'm presenting a song on a record, it's like, *boom*, there it is — a little taste. You can't give everybody everything all the time.

I've never heard a guitarist describe playing solos as "gross." That's a new one.
Let me clear that up. I didn't say, and I didn't intend to say, that all guitar solos are gross. I'm saying that the guitar solos *I* play feel gross to me. The kind of guitar playing that I love, love, love is really tasteful and intentional, and I found that the kind of guitar playing people love me to play is kind of raw and unhinged and off the rails. That's cool. It's fun to step on a fuzz pedal and play loud and wild, but I would never go back and listen to my guitar solos. I don't enjoy that.

Whereas guys like Eric Johnson, Steve Vai and Satriani, as wild as their playing is, it's still a beautifully composed and disciplined presentation that evokes the same emotion as me. I think it hits people the same way. Me playing wild and fast like that isn't the same thing at all.

Is this a bit of an internal conflict for you? What you're saying is, the kind of playing

Gary holds his Wide Sky P125 Cutaway with two P90 pickups.

"I WAS SAYING THE GUITAR SOLOS *I* PLAY FEEL GROSS TO ME. THE KIND OF GUITAR PLAYING THAT I LOVE IS REALLY TASTEFUL AND INTENTIONAL"

you really respond to isn't necessarily what your fans want from you.
When we first started going out, we were a three-piece, sometimes a four-piece with Zapata. We didn't have that many songs, so we had to stretch 'em out: It was either sing the first verse again at the end, or stretch the guitar solo out, which is what I ended up doing. I'd keep playing because we were on our last song and we were at 39 minutes in the set — but we had to play for 45 minutes. It was cool and fun and it worked, but after a while it's like, "All right." I just got tired of myself. I was like, "This is gross." I stand on that.

Well, on the new record you could have stretched "To the End of the Earth" out a bit more.
[*laughs*] Yeah, I know. We'll see what happens. Maybe that song is "to be continued."

Beyond the ES-355, what other guitars did you use on the album? I'm assuming your signature Casinos and SGs?
I used a Casino on the song "Triumph." For the riff and a lot of the loud, hard fuzzy stuff, I used an SG. I could turn it up and it wouldn't scream back at me. When I was working at my home studio, I went from Casino to SG — they were all sitting there. But my main one was the 355. I might have used a 175. I can't remember.

A few years ago, you told me that you were resisting amp modeling. Have you reconsidered?
I haven't gone there yet. I'm a little bit scared of that; it's just something new to learn and grab. I mean, I already know what a Fender Twin will do. I know what my guitars and pedals will do. If you think I'm stretching out and getting wild now, put one of those amp modeling units in front of me. It's all over. [*laughs*]

Aside from the Vibro-King, what other amps did you use?
Just a Fender Princeton and the Cesar Diaz amp. It was pretty simple.

How about effects? Any go-to pedals?
I didn't use anything consistently. I was just trying stuff, and I went through a bunch of things petty randomly. I didn't keep notes or anything. I'd go to the music shop: "I need a fuzz pedal. I need a delay. What kind of reverbs do you have?" I probably played a hundred different pedals on this thing. Every time I'd hang with Mike Elizondo, he'd look at my pedalboard and say, "Let's try some other options." He'd go to his closet and pull out a bunch of stuff.

Gary purchased this stock 1966 Epiphone Casino with a worn Cherry finish in London. The original red finish can be seen where the pickguard once was (Clark removed it).

"MIKE ELIZONDO PLAYED ME *JOHN COLTRANE AND JOHNNY HARTMAN*, AND I FELL IN LOVE WITH THAT SOUND"

I keep swapping out fuzzes and delays. I keep swapping out reverbs. I'm not settled yet. I thought I was, but during the process of recording I was trying to figure out why something that works in the studio doesn't necessarily translate live. I want this record to translate live, but I also want my tone to be recognizable. I'm trying to find a balance here. We've been in rehearsal and I'm not yet satisfied.

I'm a little surprised that you don't have any fuzz boxes or delays that you use consistently.
I don't really pay attention to gear either that much. I don't care what it looks like. I don't care who makes it. I just care what it sounds like. I can close my eyes, and I know when it's right. It's a feel thing. My body reacts to a tone in a certain way. I've always been that way.

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FUNK BROTHERS

As the Black Keys release *Ohio Players*, **Dan Auerbach** reveals how Beck, Noel Gallagher, Tom Bukovac and "an embarrassment" of guitar gear helped create the album's fun — and funky — primal garage-soul.

BY GARY GRAFF

AT THE START of the Black Keys' latest album, *Ohio Players*, singer/guitarist Dan Auerbach declares that he's going to "spend the rest of my days in the middle of nowhere."

He's joking, of course.

It's certainly been an eventful journey for Auerbach and drummer Patrick Carney since the pair met as childhood neighbors in Akron, Ohio. Both have musical family backgrounds that stoked their own interests, and diverse ones at that. Auerbach's cousin Robert Quine was one of New York City's top guns, playing with Lou Reed, Richard Hell & the Voidoids, Tom Waits, Matthew Sweet and many others. Carney's uncle Ralph Carney, meanwhile, was a saxophonist who played with Waits, among others. Auerbach and Carney seemed strange bedfellows as teens — the former was a jock, the latter a self-described outsider — but by 1996 they were playing together and recording their experiments on Carney's portable four-track recorder.

"When we get together now, it's still the same as it was then, man," Auerbach notes from within the vintage gear–oriented "embarrassment of riches" he keeps at his Easy Eye Sound studio in Nashville. "We don't even talk about it. We don't have any preconceived notions of how it's gonna go. We just start playing and making music and doing what comes naturally, just like we were doing when we were 16."

It's fair to say it's worked out well for the Black Keys. They've released a dozen studio albums (including the double-Platinum *Brothers* in 2010 and *El Camino* in 2011), a lauded *Blakroc* collaboration with Damon Dash, 10 Top 20 singles on *Billboard*'s Hot Rock & Alternative Songs chart, and five Grammy Awards from 16 nominations.

Even more impressive has been the duo's sonic evolution. The raw guitar-and-drums grit of 2002's *The Big Come Up* has developed into more sophisticated and expansive soundscapes over the years, with the likes of Danger Mouse helping to stretch how Auerbach and Carney view the Black Keys as a musical palette, introducing more instruments, and musicians, to advance their aesthetic sensibilities beyond the blues roots that provided the group's launchpad. They still love that stuff, mind you — evidence 2021's Mississippi hill country immersion *Delta Kream* — but the Keys' unapologetic sense of curiosity and adventurous ambitions have goosed Auerbach and Carney into realms beyond.

That's certainly the case with *Ohio Players* (Easy Eye Sound/Nonesuch). The Keys' fourth album since ending their five-year hiatus in 2019, it further mines the collaborative vein Auerbach and Carney struck with *Dropout Boogie* in 2022. That album was the first on which they fully embraced input from outside writers, including Face to Face alumnus and Kings of Leon producer Angelo Petraglia and, on one track, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons. *Ohio Players* ventures even further on its 14 tracks, with Beck onboard for seven and Noel Gallagher joining for another three songs. Dan the Automator performs on two cuts, and Memphis rappers Juicy J (of Three 6

RICH POLK/GETTY IMAGES FOR IHEARTRADIO

Dan Auerback (left) and Patrick Carney expanded their musical palette on *Ohio Players* by engaging outside songwriters and musicians.

Mafia) and Lil Noid lend their voices to the proceedings. Leon Michels from Auerbach's other band, the Arcs, appears as well, along with hit-making producer Greg Kurstin and members of Auerbach's Easy Eye cadre, most notably fellow Ohioan Tom Bukovac, who channels his best George Harrison on the Gallagher track "On the Game."

Ohio Players is, in fact, a combination music lab and cosmic carnival that's serious creative business. It's also a lot of fun, in some ways akin to Auerbach and Carney's occasional Record Hang DJ sessions — dance parties at which they spin seven-inch vinyl. The thrill ride begins with the thick bass notes of "This Is Nowhere," while the soul-inflected "Don't Let Me Go" grooves out of a '60s cocktail lounge. "Paper Crown," meanwhile, is funky enough to give the original Ohio Players a run for their money, and the libidinous "Please Me (Til I'm Satisfied)" is a pure, primal garage stomp. "Live Till I Die" offers a prototypical fusion of Beck-style psychedelia and Crazy Horse riff attack, while "Beautiful People (Stay High)" would fit on his 1996 album, *Odelay*. Even without liner notes, it's not hard to figure out which tracks were recorded with whom, but the Auerbach-Carney filter ensures they fit best on a Black Keys record. And from what Auerbach tells *Guitar Player*, it's clear that *Ohio Players* was as much fun to make as it is to listen to.

This is another very different-sounding Black Keys record. That's how you guys roll now, isn't it?

I guess so. I feel like every album is a different scenario, and we get a different outcome. A lot of people I like are the same way, I think. But ever since we started, there's been something about playing music with Pat that gave me confidence. If you listen to our tapes from when we were 16, 17, I swear it sounds a lot like some of the songs on *Dropout Boogie*. We haven't changed all that much. We don't have any preconceived notions of how it's gonna go. We just start recording and making music and doing what comes naturally. That's really what we've done since we were teenagers.

"WE WERE INTERESTED IN GETTING FRIENDS TO WORK WITH US, JUST FOR FUN, TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN"

You work at a pretty busy clip, with the Black Keys and all the other Easy Eye stuff. Did you sit down and say, "Okay, time to start the new Black Keys record," or something like that?

Well, y'know, we never stopped recording after we did the last album. We just kept going. One of the things we were interested in doing was getting friends in to work with us, just for fun, to see what would happen, because, y'know, we haven't done that very often. The whole musical landscape of Nashville is based on teamwork, but Pat and I had barely dipped our toes into that stuff, so we started to reach out to people. The collaborative process played a bigger role this time than it ever has.

Beck has the most prominent presence on *Ohio Players*.

He was the first person we reached out to. He was gonna be in town, so we booked a couple days in the studio, and it was so much fun. The first day we got together, we wrote "This Is Nowhere," and it just popped right out. It was Pat and I doing the music for the most part on that one, and Beck came in to help with melody and lyrics.

Did these collaborations feel like an outgrowth of what you started with *Dropout Boogie*?

Sort of, yeah. It was like we'd just barely done it there, and now it was, "Who do we love that makes really cool records,

Auerbach plays a 1960s-vintage Silvertone 1448 electric in Black Sparkle.

LARRY NIEHUES (HERE AND OPPOSITE)

who writes great songs?" So it was Beck, and then we thought about Noel Gallagher, and we reached out to him and he said, "Sure!" We were excited.

But you had to come to him.
[*laughs*] Y'know, we released that Arcs album [*2023's* Electrophonic Chronic], and Leon [*Michels*] and I were gonna be in London doing some promotion. So Pat came with us and we presented a Record Hang, and then we went into Toe Rag Studios [*an eight-track tape studio in London*] with Noel and wrote three songs in three days.

And it was a blast. We wrote those songs together in a room, and Noel had his [*1963*] Gretsch [*6210 Chet Atkins*], I had a guitar and a bass, Leon was on keyboard and Pat was playing drums. We were in a circle — Toe Rag is very, very small — and it was a really amazing experience to watch Noel cycle through chords. To just, like, be *there*. We would patiently sit back and let him do his thing, and it was amazing to watch his wheels turn in real time.

How would it work once he found the chords he wanted to use?
Well, "On the Game" is one of my favorite songs on the record, and that's a live performance with Noel. That one popped out very easily. We were just improvising melodies into the mic, and it took shape very quickly. It was kind of miraculous, to be honest.

It must feel nice to be so far into this as a recording career and still have those moments of surprise and, it sounds like, even awe.
Absolutely. We're just so blessed to even be able to do this kind of thing, to have the agency. It's like this is the real payoff for all the work we've done all these years, to be able to call people like that up and have that happen. We look up to those guys, Beck and Noel in particular. It was just amazing to get to collaborate with them.

What kind of insight did you glean about them and their processes?
Y'know, Noel's process is purely guitar. He's just so in love with the chords, and he was just cycling through and through and through, and that's how he would find his melodies. He wouldn't stop until he was satisfied. It never sounded right to him until it did, and that's when we would move on. But we couldn't move on until he got that good feeling.

With Beck, he came in and we kinda had the music done; we had a framework. But he'd come in, and it was like a spigot when it's fully open. It's like pure creativity, and it doesn't stop. It's really remarkable. He'll write verses for the song, and they'll be really beautiful, but then he'll say, "Y'know what? Save that. I've got other ideas," and he'll write a whole other song on top of that one. It's crazy. He's so prolific, the way he can write. It's amazing to watch.

You mentioned how self-contained the Black Keys were, especially at the start of the career. What did you and Pat have to change about yourselves to be open to these kinds of collaborations?
We had to be in a band for 20 years, honestly. We are only now able to do this type of thing. I know we couldn't have done it 10 years ago, 15 years ago. It wouldn't have been possible for us, 'cause we were just too in our own heads, insecure or whatever. I think we're just a lot better at it now.

What role did the hiatus play in getting you to that point?
Man, it was really nice to take a break and not feel like every time I saw Pat there was some grueling work involved. Now our relationship is better than it's ever been, and it has a lot to do with hanging out and spinning records, collecting 45s and playing records at these Records Hangs we've been doing. Those were a huge influence on this album in particular.

How so?
We weren't trying to make a record that sounded old, but we wanted to have the feeling you get when you find the right records and play them in a club, and the energy that you get from that. We wanted that kind of party atmosphere.

Auerbach performs with his 1963 Supro Martinique at Audacy's Riptide Music Festival, December 2, 2023.

Were there any particular records that tracked directly into songs on the album?
"I'm Alive" by Johnny Thunders. That was one record that hit us over the head right in the middle of making this album. But we didn't try to rip it off in any way. It was just the feeling of that record, and the directness. We would just always go to it as a reference, like, "Are we in that ballpark?"

What came as surprises on the album?
I played some gear at Toe Rag, some European '60s guitars — I forget what they were — that sounded incredible. The bass that I played sounded so good out of this little Watkins amp. That's the sound that's on this record. My buddy Tom Bukovac from Cleveland plays guitar on the record in places here and there, and I love what he added. He plays this big ol' honkin' guitar hook on "On the Game" that's amazing. It was the first or second take. I played him the song one time, and he goes in and just plays that. It's like he knows what needs to be there.

"I PLAYED SOME EUROPEAN '60S GUITARS AT TOE RAG STUDIOS THAT SOUNDED INCREDIBLE"

Isn't that a bit like throwing down the gauntlet to have other guitarists playing alongside you?
Oh, it's amazing. These are people whose playing I love. Tommy Brenneck plays on the William Bell cover, "I Forgot to Be Your Lover." The intro guitar's by Tommy. I've done a bunch of sessions with him, and he's just an amazing producer, musician and guitar player. I get inspired being around all these guys, and I love to hear what they get out of what we've done. It's always interesting to me. The guitar Tom plays on "Fever Tree" is crazy. I played one thing and he played on the other beats — the opposite beats — and it locked in. It was so cool.

You mention "I Forgot to Be Your Lover," which is the only cover on the album. How did you decided on that?
It's always been one of our favorite songs, and Pat suggested we cover it. We were in Valentine Studios in L.A., which is like a time-capsule studio that was built in the '60s. Someone found it a few years ago and it had never been touched. I'm sure being in that space had a lot to do with that decision, but it's always been one of our favorite songs, and we had Tommy there, and we had Kelly Finnigan, who sings harmony and plays the Hammond. So it was like, "Yeah, let's do it. This'll be fun."

Was there any different or particularly interesting gear used on the album?
No. I mean, we would just use whatever tool was necessary for the song. We have an embarrassment of riches here at the studio, so it's like any sound we want with any amp combination, we have it. We're kinda ready to do it. I don't even think about it anymore. We can switch so quickly between the sounds that it's not a big deal. There's Flot-A-Tone amps, there's Magnatone true vibratos, old tube amps. The [*Fender*] Tweed Deluxe got a lot of work with the spring reverb that my buddy makes. We would switch all over the place, all the time. Whatever the song called for.

You have these Memphis rappers, Juicy J and Lil Noid, on some tracks. What's your path to them?
I'd just gotten into Memphis rap a few years ago. I knew about Three 6 Mafia [*Juicy J's hip-hop group*], but only their big songs that were on major labels. So I didn't know that this whole world of Memphis rap existed, but it didn't exist on Apple or Spotify; it's only on fan uploads to YouTube from cassette tapes, and there's absolutely classic albums there. So being a lifelong rap fan and realizing there's this whole subcategory of rap, this family tree that I'd never

JASON KOERNER/GETTY IMAGES FOR AUDACY'S RIPTIDE MUSIC FESTIVAL; LARRY NIEHUES (OPPOSITE)

even heard of but was right in my wheelhouse — it kind of blew me away, and I started obsessively listening to it. For example, Lil Noid's *Paranoid Funk* feels like a classic album the same way Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* does.

So we were in the studio and constantly listening to Lil Noid, and I said, "We should get him on a track, just for fun." We reached out to him, and he was just down the road in Memphis. So he came in and we created a bed for him based on one of the tracks, in the same way we did when we made the *Blakroc* album. It was just an extension of that. But it felt awkward to only have one interplay like that, so we reached out to J and we sent him the track, and he returned his vocals and the scratching he did, like, the next day. It was so fast it was crazy. And Juicy J was the guy who found Lil Noid when he was 15 and put him on a mixtape, so it's almost like this weird little circle there that I love.

Ohio Players has a couple of meanings as a title.

That was Pat's idea. We just both thought it was really fun. We are Ohio players, literally. And we love the Ohio Players. We reached out and asked them if it would be cool to use the name, and they loved it. We were just so honored. It's all fun, really.

There's a bowling motif to the album's cover and graphics. Do you roll 'em?

Not really. I'm at the stage now that, if I go bowling, my arm is sore for two days afterward. I'm really out of bowling shape, although something tells me I've got to get back into it.

Have you and Pat continued to not stop recording since _Ohio Players_ was finished?

[*laughs*] Yeah, we've continued to not stop recording. We may have had Kenny Brown and Eric Deaton [*from the Black Keys' 2021 album,* Delta Kream] up here to play some music, just for fun. I'm always in the studio working on stuff. We just had the [*Boulder-based rock trio*] Velveteers in here; Pat and I worked with them on a song together, actually, which was the first time we did that, and that was really cool. We just made a really heavy record with [*indie garage-punk quartet*] Shannon and the Clams.

It's a lot of fun and it's really cool to be able to work with the people who were our heroes, and then it's amazing to work with people like John Muq [*a Ugandan singer-songwriter and producer living in Austin*] and [*singer*] Britti, who are making their very first albums. There's all kinds of records — a lot of just beautiful music going on.

"WE HAVE AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES AT THE STUDIO. ANY SOUND WITH ANY AMP COMBINATION, WE HAVE IT"

Do you maintain a wish list or bucket list of additional things you'd still like to do?

I'm the kind of person who likes to just try something and see what happens. That's the best way to be. You can't think about this shit too much. I'm all about putting Pat and myself into different situations to see what happens. We have strong enough personalities that we never have to worry about ourselves going too far astray. Whenever we work with someone, it's always a real collaboration. I love that we're comfortable enough to do that kind of thing. I think that means it's gonna be more fun and exciting to be able to try all this stuff, whatever we want to do.

The older we get — and the more we both get to make records with other people and work on outside projects and then come back to the Black Keys — the more we appreciate what it is we've been given. It's kind of like the gift of being able to have this musical connection.

THE INNER LIGHT

A gifted improviser with a love for Allan Holdsworth and progressive metal, **Max Light** reveals the six-string influences that fire up his avant-garde jazz excursions.

BY BILL MILKOWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE MARANTZ

HIS NAME IS like that of a Marvel superhero or the title character in a new vigilante series airing on Netflix. But Max Light plays guitar with the gift of one who has organically incorporated the lessons of his six-string forebears Kurt Rosenwinkel, Ben Monder and Allan Holdsworth into a singular vocabulary.

While his long fingers allow him to make uncommon stretches on the fretboard and conjure up near-impossible chord voicings à la Holdsworth and Monder, Light's blazing legato runs and use of an Electro-Harmonix POG2 to eliminate his picking attack come straight out of the Rosenwinkel playbook. And he applies it all in

a flawless and captivating manner on his two most recent recordings, 2023's *Henceforth* (SteepleChase) and his new album — and third as a leader — *Chaotic Neutral* (Alternative Guitar Summit Recordings).

Light grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, where, as a quintessential millennial, he played games like *Dungeons and Dragons*. He even named one frantically swinging Ornette Coleman–inspired piece on *Henceforth* after *Luftrausers*, an airborne dogfighting video game that served as the song's impetus. "I was playing the game and was really into the music of Ornette Coleman at the same time," he explains. "The form itself is an eleven-and-a-half-bar blues, basically, but with all these harmonic substitutions. So it's a bunch of different ideas mashed together."

Such serendipity might only come from an outstanding player and facile improviser with a Brainiac-like thirst for knowledge — which is an accurate way to describe the 30-year-old Light. He sits comfortably alongside such gifted contemporaries as Julian Lage, Nir Felder, Gilad Hekselman, Matteo Mancuso, and fleet-fingered Aussies Josh Meader and Ben Eunson. After graduating from the New England Conservatory of Music and placing second in the 2019 Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Competition, he distinguished himself as a sideman in tenor saxophonist Noah Preminger's band before releasing his debut as a leader with 2020's trio recording *Herplusme*.

Henceforth features tenorist Preminger, bassist Kim Cass and drummer Dan Weiss, and finds Light revealing his love of dissonance and open-string playing on the title track, as well as an ongoing interest in West African rhythms on "Barney & Sid" (named for his girlfriend's two cats, not for Kessel and Jacobs). He also tackles some challenging unisons alongside Preminger on the knotty "Subjective Object" before settling into a calming, lyrical homage to Billy Strayhorn on "Animals," which serves as well as a showcase for his beautiful voice leading.

But perhaps most mind-boggling of all on *Henceforth* is his cleverly titled "Half Marathon," a rhythmic contrafact — a composition developed from a previous work — on John Coltrane's "26-2." As Light explains, "I was trying to challenge myself and come up with stuff to do during the pandemic, and

STEPHEN WANT

"I WAS DRAWN TO ALLAN HOLDSWORTH'S TECHNIQUE BECAUSE OF ALL OF THE METAL GUITAR PLAYERS I GREW UP LISTENING TO"

I had this idea of the title being written with a division sign instead of a hyphen so that it becomes 26 ÷ 2, which would make the meter 13. And since a marathon is 26.2 miles long, that would also be 13 when divided in half. Hence, the title."

While *Henceforth* continues the chemistry Light established playing in Preminger's piano-less group, *Chaotic Neutral* features a new band with his Brooklyn colleagues Julian Shore on piano, Walter Stinson on bass and Steven Crammer on drums. "This is the first record where I was able to hire my best friends," he explains. "These are the dudes that I hang out with in Brooklyn. We get together and drink beer and just talk about music, and I feel like that energy and camaraderie is very apparent in the way we play together."

His tight rapport with Shore comes from having self-released their duo album in 2023 prior to a tour of Japan last year. "Julian hit me up in April of 2023 to go on a duo tour with him in Japan that July," he explains. "And about a month after he called me for it, he said the promoter over there wanted us to have a record to give to radio stations and clubs to promote our gigs. We had to make a record within a month, and I think it captured the moment — the excitement and fervor of that tour. I mean, here we were together in a country where we didn't speak the language, playing all these gigs and trying to make it happen every night. But what made it easy is the fact that Julian is such an amazing listener.

"So it was a really interesting process getting in there and workshopping one-on-one with an amazing piano player like Julian," he continues. "It just really opened my mind to all of these harmonic possibilities of the instrument — the ability to stack chords on top of chords on top of chords. And without even realizing it, that kind of thinking just worked its way directly into my own conception of music and my compositional process."

On *Chaotic Neutral*, Light and Shore engage in some extremely challenging unisons on tunes like the title track and "Pathos." The seamless manner in which they do so recalls the intricate, tight unisons and through-composed lines that alto saxophonist Lee Konitz played with Lennie Tristano, Warne Marsh and Billy Bauer on his 1955 Prestige album, *Subconscious-Lee*. "That music was immensely influential to me, and it still is," Light says. "Lennie Tristano had the biggest impact on me. I transcribed a bunch of his solos from *Tristano* [*Atlantic, 1955*]. Those lines are unbelievably beautiful and full of twists and turns and harmonic surprises. And 'Pathos' is definitely coming directly out of that Konitz-Marsh-Tristano-Bauer scene. I love that music."

Light's tune "Things," a contrafact on the jazz standard "All the Things You Are," recalls Konitz's contrafact on that same tune, which he called "Thingin'."

"I WAS ABLE TO HIRE MY BEST FRIENDS. OUR CAMARADERIE IS VERY APPARENT IN THE WAY WE PLAY TOGETHER"

Says Light, "That arrangement of mine has been kicking around for years, and I've played it so many times with friends that it seemed like a natural thing to do on this record, because it was something we could blow over without talking too much. It's derived from a Ben Monder arrangement of 'All the Things You Are,' where he takes the last bar off of every section. I learned this arrangement through Noah Preminger, who used to play with Monder a lot. But my idea was, Why not do the same thing but then eliminate any bar with a repeated bass note or repeated melody note? So it turns into this cyclical-sounding piece that's still recognizable as 'All the Things You Are.'

"But then I did a Tristano-y approach to it, where I took these little melodic fragments and placed them around in a melodic, contrapuntal sort of way. My stuff will always be connected to him without meaning to, just because it was so influential to me when I found it."

Max Light performs with (center) Steven Crammer and Walter Stinson at Drom, New York City, April 11, 2023.

SCOTT FRIEDLANDER

In any interview with Light — or if he's just hanging with his colleagues, talking about music between Happy Hour sets at Bar Bayeux in Brooklyn — the name of Ben Monder is readily invoked. That Mondrian influence is apparent in the unusual chordal voicings, intervallic leaps and demanding string skipping heard throughout *Chaotic Neutral*, and particularly on his solo guitar introduction to the title track.

"I think that the band would agree that 'Chaotic Neutral' is the most demanding composition on the record," he says. "It has this odd-meter thing going that's really messed up, but we played it so much at our regular Thursday gig at Bar Bayeux that, when it was time to do it, we just did it in one take. I had been working on intros for that tune because it's such a nice harmonic situation to investigate in there. And I ended up taking this motif and improvising on it and slowly developing it into the material of 'Chaotic Neutral.' So the intro is a semi-related motif to the composition, though I'm exploring it in a more abstract way.

"And 'Chaotic Neutral' itself is definitely not atonal, but it's almost adjacent to it in the way it explores extensions and stacks of chords. It's my attempt at trying to make very dissonant tensions sound melodic — sort of an E flat minor over E minor over G major sharp-11th kind of thing.

"So there's a ton of stuff going on in that tune, but it all derives from this sort of harmonic cloud that actually came from playing with Julian and having the ability to have a clear harmonic context to play around with, just to explore the limits of what I can hear on top of it."

And while "Brown Bear" is another gnarly offering on *Chaotic Neutral*, tunes like the elegant "Times Had" and the delicate, Erik Satie–like "Wash" offer a calming breath after such intense playing. "The harmony on 'Wash' is definitely influenced by some French Impressionist stuff," Light concurs. "And as soon as I had that particular chord — it's an open-string G major, but also a minor chord — I was like, Okay, I have the whole composition now, because it's just going to be this thing that revolves around these very cloudy in-between major-minor chords. It's a one-page chart that just has the guitar part on it and no chord symbols or anything, and I immediately could hear the way that these guys would be able to move and shape the thing.

Although he admits holding such grips on the guitar for the song's duration is "incredibly exhausting," Light says, "I felt that sustaining each note of the chord was the most important thing about capturing the character of this thing." Still, it was too much for him to perform the song more than once during the album's making. The two takes of "Wash" on *Chaotic Neutral* both feature his one

performance. "We recorded 'Wash' in one take, and I was like, 'I can't do it again,'" he says. "So that second take is actually them playing with my guitar part from the first take. It ended up being this very swirly, intricate thing. But my guess is 'Wash' is probably not going to make too many appearances on the bandstand, just because it's too much work for me. I mean, Ben Monder can do that shit. He can have it."

There's that name again.

"I don't know if there's anyone more influential to my compositional process than Ben Monder," Light says. "I come from a relatively straight-ahead jazz background, coming up just outside Washington, D.C., so I always loved the great improvisers of Black American music in the 20th century, like John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Bud Powell, Bird, Miles Davis. But I've always loved playing metal guitar. I was into heavy metal, death metal and progressive metal long before I got into jazz and improvising. So when I found players like Kurt and Mike Moreno, Lage Lund and Gilad Hekselman, there was something that was incredibly seductive about the way they were able to swing but still play modern, technology-based electric guitar. They play semihollow instruments, but they also use a lot of effects.

"And Monder was huge for me as far as that goes. There's stuff that Ben can do that is physically impossible for people. I took a lesson with him when I first moved to town, and he was playing diagonal bar chords — just a bunch of mini bars with the first joint of his fingers. It's unfathomable!

"And I truly think that Monder's music is going to be regarded in the future as classical guitar repertoire. He had a piece called 'Window Pane' on his album *Excavation* that I think is one of the greatest works for solo guitar ever composed. It's so beautiful and subtle, and the way the harmony shifts and returns and the way he develops that stuff is just amazing. My own tune 'Dennisport,' from *Herplusme*, is 100 percent derivative of Monder. You can't escape the influence of Monder."

Light has similar high praise for guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel. "His compositions, his improvising, his sound, his way of articulating and the way he uses his right hand — it's all hugely influential for me," the guitarist says. "He deeply affected me and deeply influenced the way I think about music and the way I physically think about the instrument I play. I think Kurt is easily one of the most important guitar players in the history of the instrument."

Light's pedalboard includes (from left) a Boomerang III Phrase Sampler, Walrus Audio Fathom Multi-Function Reverb, MXR Ten Band EQ, Rat pedal, Rock Stock Nano tuner, Electro-Harmonix POG2, Gamechanger Audio Plus Pedal and Dunlop Volume (X) Mini Pedal.

STEPHEN WANT (TOP)

"THE POG HAS A COMPRESSIVE QUALITY THAT ALLOWS ME TO CUT THROUGH, OR BLEND WITH HORN PLAYERS OR INTO AN ENSEMBLE"

Discovering the POG2, the pedal that allows Rosenwinkel to eliminate the sound of his picking attack, was a huge breakthrough for Light. "I couldn't fathom how light he was playing with his right hand," he explains. "It was just so delicate and nuanced, and he was able to pull so much sound out of the guitar that it sounded like he was bowing the strings. So I started cranking my amp and trying to play as quietly on the instrument as possible, simultaneously, to get that sort of light-touch articulation thing going on. And that was years before I found the POG2. It has this compressive quality that allows me to cut through or blend with horn players or into an ensemble. It's almost like I developed in the direction of using this thing, and that totally unlocked my way of playing."

Another primary influence for him was the late, great Allan Holdsworth. "He's like 'Trane," Light exclaims. "The amount of information he was searching for and playing, and the sophistication of his harmonic concept that he was channeling through his completely profound technique is just unbelievable. I was drawn to it because of all of the metal guitar players that I grew up listening to — like the lead guitar player of [*extreme metal band*] Meshuggah [*Fredrik Thordendal*]: When you listen to the way he improvises, it's immediately obvious that this guy is into Holdsworth. Holdsworth is, like, untouchable, unimpeachable. His total pursuit of understanding music and speaking the language as fluently as possible is astounding. He is just the total king. I would build a shrine to him."

A self-described "serial monogamist" when it comes to guitar, Light played his Collings I-30 semihollow exclusively (through a Harry Colby–modified Deluxe Reverb amp) on *Chaotic Neutral*. "Prior to that, I had been playing a D'Angelico DC Premier, which was my pandemic guitar," he explains. "I just played it to death, basically. That's the guitar I played on *Henceforth*, and it was starting to fall apart. So a couple of months later, for my 30th birthday, I got this Collings guitar that I had my eye on forever."

Light played his Collings I-30 semi-hollow exclusively on *Chaotic Neutral*.

> "PERFORMING WITH AN AMAZING PIANO PLAYER LIKE JULIAN OPENED MY MIND TO THE HARMONIC POSSIBILITIES OF THE GUITAR"

Light found his Collings at TR Crandall, a vintage guitar shop on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. "I was like, Oh, man, it's over for me — this is it! And as soon as I got it, man, I was like, Okay, now I'm a professional musician — this is a real instrument. I mean, it was on such a higher level than anything I had ever played before.

"So this is my guitar now. It's a semihollow with Loller humbuckers in it. The thing sounds amazing and it only weighs, like, five pounds, which was the icing on the cake. Being a professional guitar player in New York and having to take the trains all the time, having a light setup is essential."

That portable rig will come in handy in the coming months, as it has in the past. When he's not touring Europe in pianist Christian Sands' quartet or with Kaisa's Machine, led by the Finnish-born, New York City–based bassist Kaisa Mäensivu, or gigging locally in saxophonist Kevin Sun's quartet, Light and a rotating cast of his Brooklyn colleagues can always be found at their regular Thursday hang from 5:30 to 7:30 at the 700-square-foot Bar Bayeux in Prospect Lefferts Gardens.

And if he's not there, he's probably woodshedding. "I'm a great believer in the virtues of noodling on guitar," Light offers. "I think if you talked to any one of my teachers, they would basically say of my entire life, 'He never shut up. He just never stopped playing while we were talking.' And I'm still like that to this day."

SCOTT FRIEDLANDER

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FIELD GOAL

Marshall Crenshaw made the guitar album of his dreams. But critics panned its production, halting his rising career. Forty years later, ***Field Day*** is finally getting the respect it's always deserved.

BY CHRISTOPHER SCAPELLITI

"**OF ALL MY** Warner Bros. albums, it's the one I love the most, without a doubt. And maybe that's because I took so much shit for it."

When Marshall Crenshaw set out to make *Field Day* in early 1983, he was riding high on the success of his self-titled debut. Released the previous April, and recorded with his duo — bassist Chris Donato and Crenshaw's brother, drummer Robert — *Marshall Crenshaw* was a sunny, power-pop confection, full of three-minute tunes whose styles recalled the artists that populated rock and roll's late '50s to early '60s heyday, including Buddy Holly, Carl Perkins and the Beatles. The album showed Crenshaw to be a fine songwriter and singer, but it was his guitar skills that proved to be his unlikely strong suit for a pop artist in those days of synth-driven new wave bands. Chords, double-stops riffs and interstitial melodies were part and parcel of a Marshall Crenshaw guitar track, all of them woven together — with a healthy amount of slapback echo — to create something as ear-catching and fine as his plangent vocal lines. Remove the singing from a Crenshaw tune and you'll have a guitar instrumental that's every bit as enjoyable.

But one thing in particular bothered Crenshaw about his premiere album: the guitar sound. His producer, the former Brill Building songwriter Richard Gottehrer, had built each of its songs around layers of guitar tracks, including beds of as many as six acoustics that were pushed low in the mix to thicken the sound. It was a far cry from the full-blooded rock-trio rave-ups that had made Crenshaw's band one to watch when they launched in New York City's clubs just a year or so before. It irked him enough that he decided his next album would be different.

"The whole process with all those layers of acoustics, I didn't really want to do it that way," Crenshaw says. "But Richard was there — I'd asked him to be there — so I just went with it.

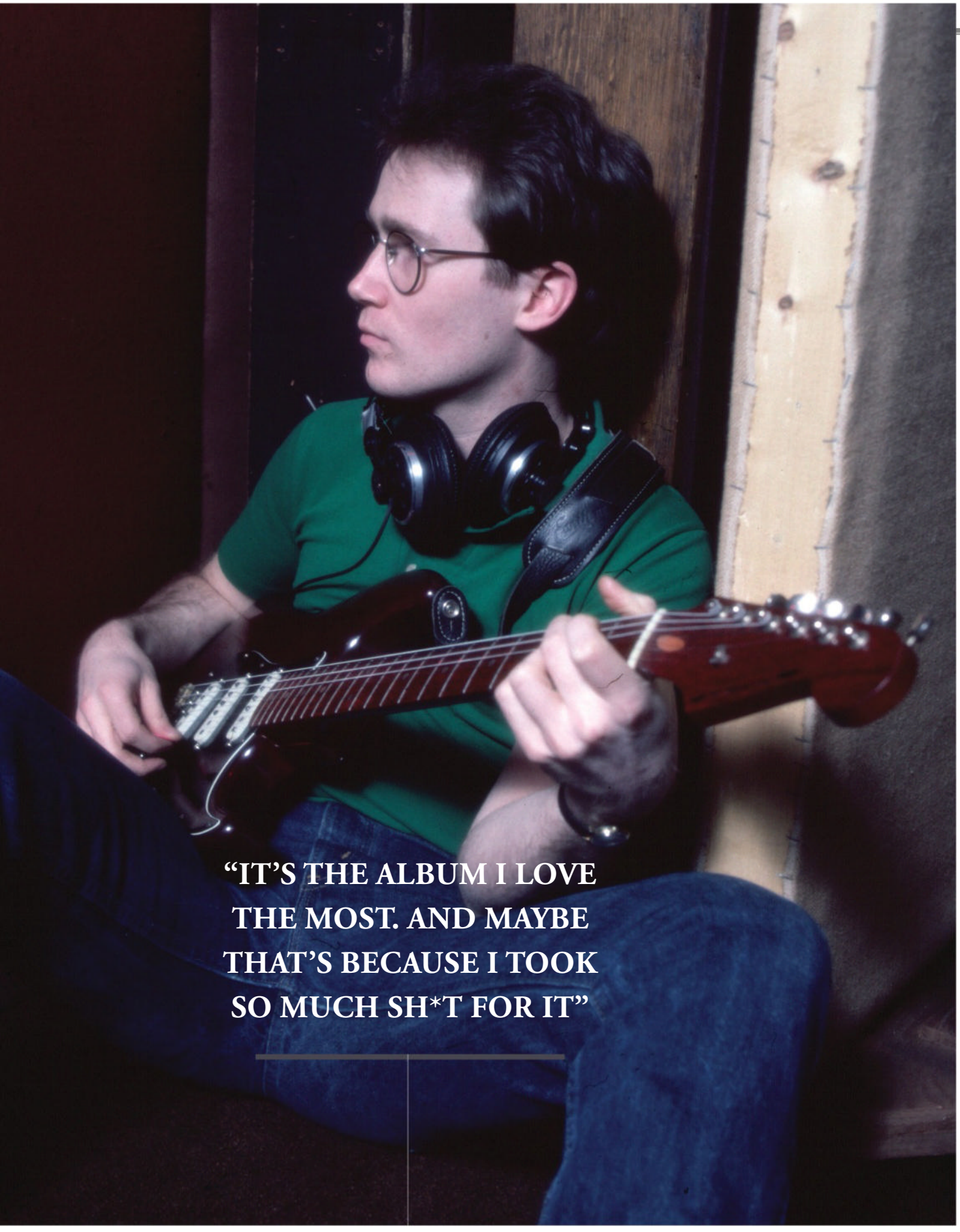
"But then when it came time to do *Field Day*, I just said, No, it's not going to be that this time. It's going to be this other thing that I wanted in the first place. *Field Day* was a reaction on my part to the first album."

And that reaction was explosive. From *Field Day*'s opening track, "Whenever You're on My Mind," Crenshaw's guitar playing bursts with a clarity and immediacy unlike anything heard on his debut, accompanied by the gated-reverb blast of Robert's drum kit and Donato's supple bass lines. Over the course of 10 tracks, Crenshaw and his band update their sound to power-pop perfection, a distinction that is duly celebrated in the recently released *Field Day* 40th Anniversary Expanded Edition. In addition to the original album cuts, it offers six bonus tracks, including instrumental versions of "Our Town" and "Monday Morning Rock" that let his guitar work shine. Listening to these gems, it's easy to understand why Crenshaw calls *Field Day* "the album I always wanted to make."

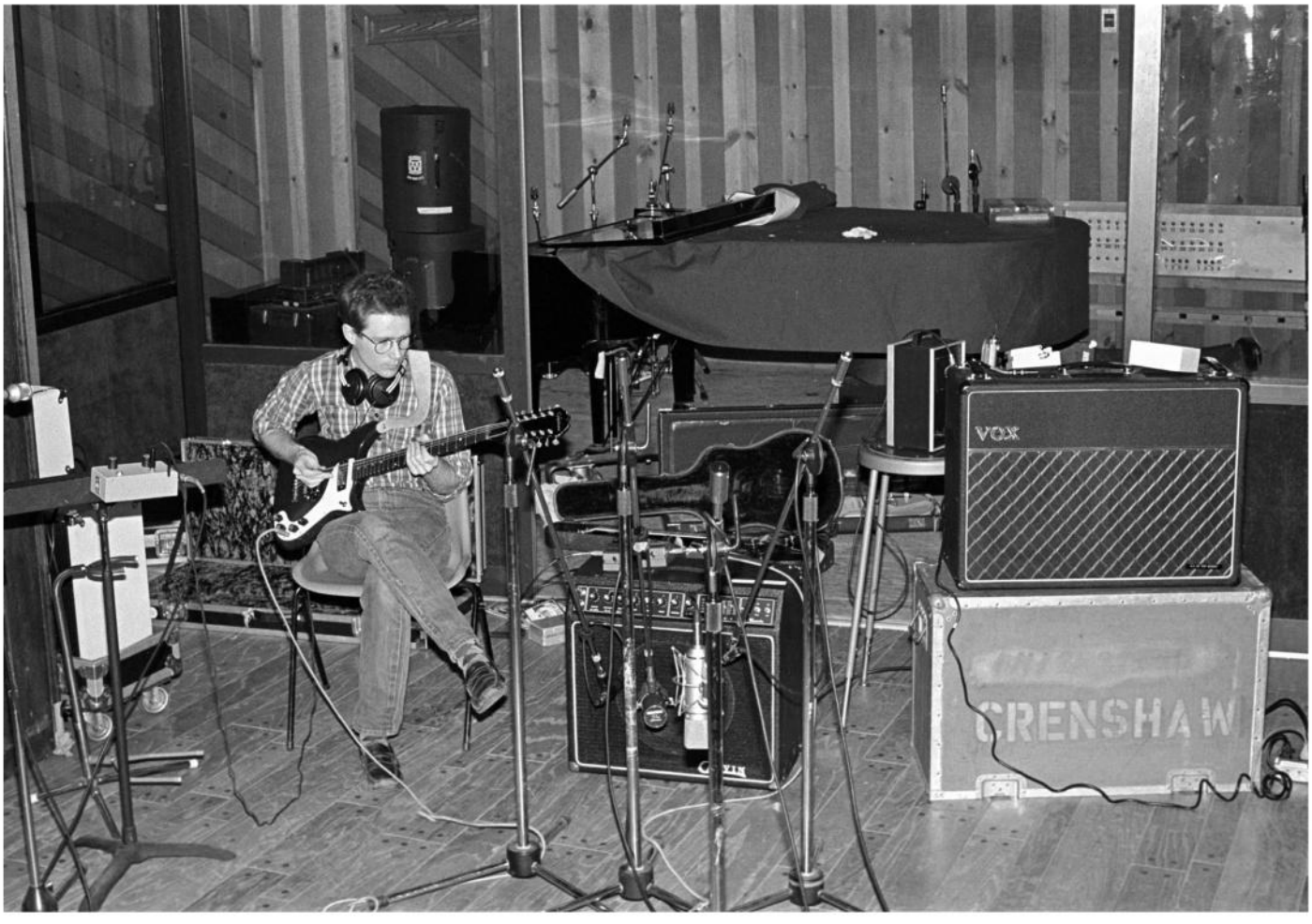
Unfortunately, it wasn't the follow-up record that critics had expected from an artist whose retro-tinged debut had so thoroughly delighted them. The backlash was swift, Warner's reaction was rash, and the cost to Crenshaw was regrettable. *Field Day* became his career-defining album — just not the way he'd intended it to be.

THE CALL TO make a second album came much faster than Crenshaw had anticipated. The overwhelmingly positive reviews for his debut, combined with its commercial success — it hit number 50 during its six months on the *Billboard* charts and sold nearly 400,000 units, while the single "Someday Someway" reached 36 — convinced Warner Bros. to keep the momentum going.

GARY GERSHOFF; COURTESY OF YEP ROC RECORDS



“IT’S THE ALBUM I LOVE THE MOST. AND MAYBE THAT’S BECAUSE I TOOK SO MUCH SH*T FOR IT”



Crenshaw plays his Epiphone Coronet through what appears to be a Carvin X-100 tube combo as his Vox AC30 sits nearby. "The Carvin amp — they gave it to me," Crenshaw says. "I don't think it got used at all on any record, but a black 12-string that I bought from them is heard on 'All I Know Right Now' through one of those blonde Music Man amps. That guitar was nice."

"It was kind of a funny move to make a second album that soon after the first," Crenshaw says. "We'd only just made the first album, but I thought, Yeah, I love making records. Let's go!"

From the project's outset, Crenshaw knew he wanted to work with Steve Lillywhite. By 1983, the British producer had made a name for himself helming celebrated albums by U.K. punk and new wave acts like Ultravox, Siouxsie and the Banshees, XTC and the Psychedelic Furs. "If you were paying attention to the English scene, or if you were in the clubs all the time like I was, you heard a lot of stuff from him that was very distinctive," Crenshaw says. "Like 'Generals and Majors' by XTC. It was like, *What the hell is that sound?*"

But it was Lillywhite's work with U2 that sealed the deal. "It was because of 'I Will Follow,'" Crenshaw says. "All the DJs in the clubs played that record. I could hear that there were very few instruments on it, but it had this magnificent sound. And I thought, Him — we gotta get him. I can harness that thing that he's doing and make that work for me. I thought he would just be perfect for what I wanted to do."

Despite Crenshaw's success, Lillywhite was too deep in the British scene for the guitarist to appear on his radar. "I wasn't really aware of him," the producer says over the phone. "I was in my U2 sort of bubble, and I hadn't really done any American artists, so it was a great opportunity."

The artist and producer quickly hit it off. "He was a lovely guy, and he had his brother on drums," Lillywhite exclaims. "And, weirdly, he's the only artist I think I've worked with where the brothers were not arguing all the time. I've worked with the Psychedelic Furs, where Richard and Tim Butler would go down to the pub and then come back and just fight. That's what youngsters are like. But Marshall and Robert were fantastic."

Although Crenshaw admits he felt rushed to come up with new material, Lillywhite recalls that the songs were largely finished by the time he arrived. "I'd been used to working with punk bands, who were not so prepared," he says. "Whereas with Marshall, there was never a case of him coming to the studio without finished lyrics, which I had had for three years with [*U2 singer*] Bono. With Marshall, it was like, 'Wow, he's got his lyrics finished!'"

Checking into the Power Station — at the time a six-year-old state-of-the-art studio in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen — Crenshaw's band and Lillywhite settled in for what was, by all accounts, an efficient

"I CHOSE STEVE BECAUSE OF U2'S 'I WILL FOLLOW.' I THOUGHT, WE GOTTA GET HIM"

production, aided by Crenshaw's preparedness, the musicians' skills and the production-line-style operation. "First we chose a tempo and put the click track down," Crenshaw explains. "I would do a guitar and guide vocal, and then we'd just start building it from there." As he recalls, the album was completed in about five weeks. "It went pretty fast," he remarks.

And yet, five weeks doesn't seem particularly short when you consider the album has just 10 tracks. Add to that Crenshaw's desire to keep overdubs to a minimum and it seems the record could have been completed in much less time.

As it turns out, Lillywhite's tracking techniques meant the group never performed as a trio. "No. Never. There was no ensemble playing on the album," Crenshaw confirms. "Not only that but the drum set was recorded drums first, and then cymbals. Isn't that crazy?"

But it's not so weird once you hear it from Lillywhite. "That sort of sound that I got is really good for the drums. But the way I miked the drums up, it wasn't good for the cymbals," he explains. "So in those days, I would record the cymbals separately because I could isolate the sounds better. And the room was very bright and echoey, so if you compress the room sound, you can sort of suck the room into your sound."

It was a sound Crenshaw was especially enamored with, owing both to Lillywhite's liberal use of gated reverb — a technique he'd popularized with Phil Collins on Peter Gabriel's 1980 track "Intruder" — and the Power Station itself. "The sounds on *Field Day* are really organic sounds," the guitarist says. "The Power Station was like a work of art inside. It's all exposed wood, and it was one of the few places in New York where they still had old tube equipment in place — like, a ton of it. And so I think nearly everything on the album got cranked through those Pultec EQs at some point or another. I really, really love those."

When tracking his guitar, Crenshaw aimed for single takes. "Once the drums were down, I would put on the main rhythm guitar, but I would always go for a complete take from start to finish, like I was playing it onstage," he says. "I wanted to be straightforward all the way through and have that feeling of excitement building and grooving."

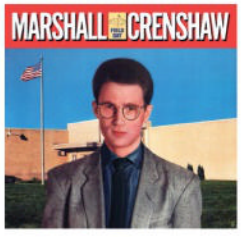
Crenshaw came to the sessions with a small but varied arsenal of guitars and amps, including his main guitar, a 1966 Fender Strat that he received just out of high school from his cousin Chuck. "He served in the Air Force during the Vietnam war, and while he was over there he splurged and bought himself a Fender Stratocaster," Crenshaw relates. "It was kind of a quirky one, because the neck was super skinny. I've never seen one like this on a Fender guitar before. It was almost like they were copying Mosrite for the Asian market. And I remember on the case it had a silver sticker that said, 'Fender. Sold in S.E. Asia by the Tsang Fook Piano Company, Marina House, Hong Kong.'"

By the time of the *Field Day* sessions, the neck had been replaced with an ESP make "with kind of a '55 Strat profile," Crenshaw says. "I found it in Manny's, or one of those other places on 48th Street. The only way I could afford it was to take the '66 neck off and sell that to a guy across the street, and then go back across to the other side of the street and buy the ESP neck. Now the guitar is back to looking like it did when I first got it from my cousin, except I got a '65 neck instead of a '66 'cause I hate those big headstocks on the Strat."

In addition to the Strat, Crenshaw had an Epiphone Coronet with a P90 pickup, a Telecaster and a guitar he'd purchased just before the sessions: a '55 Gretsch Jet Fire Bird, heard on the songs "Try" and "One Day With You." "I dreamed of having one for years," he says. "I'd seen Bo Diddley on the covers of his first two albums holding one, and I was like, Where do I get one of those? Duane Eddy played one too. And those DeArmond pickups! I just always wanted the DeArmonds."

For amps, he relied mostly on a Vox AC30 and a Fender Dual Showman. A Music Man RD-50 head and cabinet were put to use as well, while a Carvin combo was also present but likely not employed. Effects included Boss echo and chorus pedals. "I always used a slap echo on my guitar instead of

Crenshaw and Steve Lillywhite at the console in the Power Station's control room.



ABOVE: The original *Field Day* cover art (top), the 40th anniversary revision (middle) and the "U.S. Remix" E.P. that Warner Bros. hastily issued in response to criticism of the album's production.

RIGHT: Crenshaw at a *Field Day* session playing a Fender Telecaster. "I only had the Tele for a few weeks," he says. "Someone had sanded the fingerboard down to where it was almost flat — a shame since the neck shape and everything else about the guitar was really nice. I used it for the solo on 'One Day With You' — nothing else."

"I INVITED DANNY GATTON TO PLAY A SOLO, BUT HE DIDN'T SHOW UP. I JUST THOUGHT, WHAT WOULD HE PLAY IF HE WAS HERE?"

reverb," he says. "I listened to a lot of rockabilly and I listened to Les Paul, and there was always slap echo on the guitar. I just fell in love with that sound, so I kept it on all the time."

Sculpting the band's sound, Lillywhite made the drums and guitar the most prominent aspects of the mix. Crenshaw largely left him alone. "We would never discuss things too much," the producer explains. "Because if I did my job and he did his job, there was just so much more room for joy."

The joy is evident from the very first sound on the album: Crenshaw's overdriven guitar riff to "Whenever You're on My Mind," the album's lead single. The song is among the most infectious tunes in his catalog, or in the power-pop pantheon for that matter. Crenshaw wrote it years before making his first album, "but I kept it in my back pocket in case I needed it later," he says.

If the recording sounds like Crenshaw and his band are having a blast, it's because they are, and even indulging in a bit of juvenile fun. "We decided to put satanic messages on the record," he confesses with a grin. "I would just whisper and say things here and there." It doesn't take an especially careful listening to hear a pair of indecipherable comments on "Whenever You're on My Mind." The first occurs five seconds in. As Crenshaw explains, "Just before I went out to do that take, Scott Litt told me a dirty story about Robert Gordon, the rockabilly singer." (A major player in the late-'70s rockabilly revival movement, Gordon had scored a hit with his recording of Crenshaw's "Someday Someway" in 1981.) "Scott had gone down to Nashville with Robert and they had some adventures. And what I whisper at the beginning of the track is the punchline to the story, which was, 'I think she dug it.'" The second message, heard during the guitar solo, is a poke at Elvis Presley's legendary appetite for cheeseburgers, which accounted for his enormous girth at the time of his death. "In the control booth, we'd been talking about the Memphis Mafia," Crenshaw says, referring to Presley's ever-present entourage. "During the guitar solo, I could see my brother through the [*studio booth*] window, and I just yelled out, 'Cheeseburger now!'"

Although Crenshaw was working to get away from the sound of his debut, he didn't entirely abandon its early rock and soul trappings. "Try," a heartfelt ballad in 12/8 time — a signature of the classic rock and roll era — adopts the shuffle rhythm of his early hit "There She Goes Again." "It's the

"It was a ton of fun," Crenshaw says of the sessions. "We were all really hyped-up, high-on-life young guys."

same drum beat, just slowed down," Crenshaw confirms. "I copied that beat from a song called 'Backfield in Motion' by Mel & Tim, a Chicago soul hit record when I was in high school. It's also on 'It's All Right' by the Impressions."

Likewise, "One More Reason to Cry" and "One Day With You" have a rockabilly flair, and the latter features a twanging solo full of double-stops. As Crenshaw explains, that spotlight was originally intended for his pal Danny Gatton, who was in town performing in Robert Gordon's band. "He and I were friends at that time and I invited him to come and play a solo on that song," he relates. "And he said he would come, but he didn't show up. So I just thought, Okay, what would he play if he was here? I was trying to get in that ballpark."

And then there's "What Time Is It." The only cover tune on the album, it's a bona fide early '60s classic co-written by Crenshaw's former producer, Richard Gottehrer. "I was kind of doing a shout-out to him because I only did one album with Richard and then I moved on," Crenshaw explains. "And he really did a lot for me. I don't want to say he discovered me, but he was the first person, with the kind of clout that he had, to open the door for me. So I had a sense that I owed something to him.

"But the other thing is that the song was a favorite of mine. So it's a combination of those two things. Steve really arranged that. That's him clicking his tongue for the [*tick-tock*] percussion."

Lillywhite also provided the track with a more contemporary sound, adding backward reverb on the outro to create a wash of psychedelic reverie. "That song is a little art piece," Crenshaw notes. "It's kind of oddball, but nice."

What really stands out on *Field Day*, though, is how Crenshaw's sense of harmony and chromaticism had developed since his first album. Surprises abound throughout the record, such as on the penultimate chord to the middle-eight in "Try," where he substitutes an F for a D, moving out of the song's key center. Or on the refrain to "All I Know Right Now," where he shifts the song from D major to G major 7, and uses chord substitution to segue smoothly back to D.

"I'm just copying other people and their stuff that grabbed me," Crenshaw explains. "I'm thinking in particular of Burt Bacharach. I heard a thousand of his songs when I was growing up. And then he had a couple of disciples, namely Brian Wilson and [*R&B songwriter and producer*] Thom Bell, two other writers I love. So I'm just trying in my own crude way to copy that, because I don't really know the right chord forms all the time. I'm just trying to really go deep inside myself and come up with stuff that'll engage people emotionally. And the songs from those writers — there's a character to the music that had that effect on me, so I just figured I'd copy them."

Given the ease and creativity with which the recordings took shape, Crenshaw says the sessions were "loads of fun," and were often followed by after-hours entertainment. It was this late-night activity that inspired one of *Field Day*'s most upbeat songs, "Monday Morning Rock." (And speaking of key changes, Crenshaw actually calls one out at the solo break.) "We would go out at night after we were done. It'd be late at night, like, two in the morning, and everyone would head out. I remember a couple times going someplace and it would be broad daylight when we came out. So 'Monday Morning Rock' — it was just an idea in my head."

Perhaps the only song that gave Crenshaw any trouble was the closer, "Hold It," which describes, rather unexpectedly, a fondness for hearing Michael Jackson on his radio. While some listeners might have thought it was an attempt to appear contemporary — nothing was bigger than Jackson's *Thriller* album in 1983 — Crenshaw says the call-out was heartfelt. "I really loved him and that *Off the Wall* album, especially 'Rock With You,'" he says.

Crenshaw in the studio with a Music Man RD-50 head and cabinet. "We got a free backline from Music Man," he recalls. "It was great stuff and we used it all during 1983."

"I had the 45 and just listened to it obsessively. And I'd gotten *Thriller* when it came out and was just nuts over that.

"But that song was very, very hurriedly written. I wrote the lyrics while I was cutting the vocal. I was most certainly under the gun, because Steve was going to leave the next day, and I had to go someplace too. I went out and recorded ['*Rock On*'] for [Superman III] at Giorgio Moroder's house. So the album had to be finished and I couldn't get 'Hold It' together until finally I had no choice but to just grind it out."

"IT'S THE FIRST ALBUM WHERE YOU CAN TELL THAT I'M A GUITAR PLAYER"

WITH RECORDING COMPLETE, it was evident to Crenshaw and Lillywhite that they had achieved exactly what they had intended: a record that captured the trio with as much power as they had onstage. Thanks to what might now be thought of as the "limitations" of 24-track recording, they'd had to commit to various takes and sounds as they went along, with the result that *Field Day* was largely mixed direct to tape. "I loved the two-inch 24-track format," Lillywhite says. "It was just perfect, because it meant you had to make decisions and you could never get carried away with recording too much. I would always build a mix as I was recording. That way, every time you do something, you're just adding to the mix. And then by the time you've finished it, the mix is done, because you've been mixing as you go."

But even before *Field Day*'s release, signs of the trouble to come were foreshadowed in its cover image, a composite photo of the artist incongruously placed before a post-war-era public school building. It had been created without consulting Crenshaw, who was away on vacation after recording was completed. He hated it on sight. "It's supposed to be kind of tongue in cheek, with me standing in front of this building and the American flag and all that stuff," he says. "But I just don't think it's a good picture." However, since changing the cover would have delayed the album's release, he grudgingly consented to it.

In April, two months before *Field Day* was issued, record buyers got an advance taste of Crenshaw's new sound with the single release "Whenever You're on My Mind." Aided by a music video shot in

Performing at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City, February 11, 1982, with what appears to be his '66 Fender Strat. Notes Crenshaw, "It was maybe just a year and change from our first gig in front of about four people to having packed houses, tons of press, not one but two songs on WNEW, publishers and agents and record labels chasing us. Our thing really snowballed fast. It was very exciting."

England, it reached number three on *Billboard*'s Bubbling Under Hot 100 chart — an auspicious launch for the new phase of Crenshaw's career.

But *Field Day* wouldn't enjoy equal success. Released in June, the album spent just 14 weeks on the charts, where it peaked at 52. Blame it on the absence of a follow-up single (*Field Day* offered numerous contenders). Blame it on the album cover. But popular consensus says the problem was the music critics, who were almost unanimously put off by Crenshaw's more current sound.

Robert Christgau's review is a prime example. Although he graded *Field Day* an A+, ostensibly on behalf of its songwriting and performances, Christgau couldn't get past the production, and devoted nearly the entirety of his 177-word review to it in damning praise: "With Steve Lillywhite doctoring Crenshaw's efficient trio until it booms and echoes like cannons in a cathedral, the production doesn't prove Marshall isn't retro, though he isn't. It proves that no matter how genuine your commitment to the present, you can look pretty stupid adjusting to fashion."

"Usually you don't have critics complaining about how something is produced," Lillywhite offers wryly. "So I do remember being surprised by the response. There were all these comments about the ambience and the sound. I think people were expecting something more like his debut album and what they got was a step up, something much more sophisticated and thoughtful. It's relatively aggressive as well. It's quite in your face and it had attitude, and that's a great thing to put on a record."

Alarmed by the response, Warner Bros. quickly hired famed dance remixer John Luongo to create tamer-sounding versions of "Our Town," "For Her Love" and "Monday Morning Rock." Released as a 12-inch E.P. with "U.S. Remix" emblazoned on its front, the disc was an attempt to salvage what the label sensed was an artistic error. And despite having "Only Available in U.K." prominently printed on its cover, the E.P. was readily available in the U.S., where "damage control" was essential.

"That was kind of foisted on me," Crenshaw says of the E.P. "And then Steve yelled at me. He was like, 'Well, I could have done it. I would have done a better job of it.' So it was somebody else's thing, not mine. I just walked away from it."

AND HE STAYED away. Two years would pass before Crenshaw returned with *Downtown*, a darker, richer and more country-roots affair, produced by T Bone Burnett and featuring performances by G.E. Smith, Tony Levin and Mickey Curry. Noticeably absent among the album's star-studded personnel were Donato and Robert Crenshaw, the latter of whom played drums on only two of *Downtown*'s 10 tracks.

"Well, you know, after *Field Day*, everything just really blew up," Crenshaw explains. "The reaction to it just shocked me so much. I hated what the record company did with it. That's a very dirty story. But, you know, I was completely fershimmeled. My mind was blown. So I just took a long break. And then I just kind of started from scratch again."

If the critics were cruel, time has been kind to *Field Day*. Once beloved only by Crenshaw's most die-hard fans, the album is now considered by many to be among his best works and one of rock's great "undiscovered" treasures. If Crenshaw wanted to quickly move past the record in 1983, he had no reservations about revisiting it for its 40th anniversary or revising its awkward cover art.

"I just wanted to do justice to it," he says. "That album is great. It's the definitive one. It's the first album where you can tell that I'm a guitar player. You can't really tell that on the first album; you can't hear my guitar. You can't hear *me* and my sound on the guitar. Whereas on *Field Day*, the guitar is almost all you hear. And I love the guitar playing on it."

ACOUSTIC INTEL

Guitar Player gets the 411 on some of the most inspiring acoustic gear for 2024.

BY JIMMY LESLIE

IN THIS DIGITAL age, where an endless stream of equipment information seems to come from all directions at any moment, now seems like a good time to take a 360-degree scan of the current landscape, filter though the spew and focus on a few. What you'll find over these pages is some inspiring gear that connects acoustic players to primary developments that have appeared scattered throughout the foggy ether of the pandemic era, as well as a few novel innovations and commemorative celebrations. This is by no means comprehensive coverage of the entire acoustic universe but rather a selected swath of shining stars on the gear horizon, with a primary lens concentrated on guitars.

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

BREEDLOVE TB VINTAGE EDITION BLUES ORANGE CONCERTINA

BREEDLOVE AND BEDELL guitars both fly under the banner of Two Old Hippies. As owner Tom Bedell explains, "The Breedloves have bolt-on necks and are essentially Taylor killers, while Bedells are basically Martin killers." Bedell himself is usually entrenched with the line that bears his name, but for the first time ever he's put his initials on a gorgeous orange Breedlove made of solid myrtlewood with a Baggs M1 magnetic pickup in the soundhole. "I wanted a guitar that sounded great playing the blues," he reports. I had a chance to play a few Delta licks on the unplugged guitars in their booth at the NAMM show, and the instrument had an authentic appeal. The Breedlove TB Vintage Edition Blues Orange Concertina is priced more like a Bedell than a Breedlove, which may put it out of range for some few blues enthusiasts, but those with the greenbacks and an orange appreciation will dig it. *TB Vintage Edition Blues Orange Concertina, $4,999.* **breedlovemusic.com**

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

COLE CLARK TRUE HYBRID TL3

COLE CLARK MADE hybrid history by straddling the acoustic/electric boundary with the True Hybrid TL2. The new TL3 ups the ante with improved magnetic pickups and dazzling aesthetics. The body remains a thinline Grand Auditorium loaded with Cole Clark's PG3 acoustic pickup system, plus a magnetic system with dual outputs designed to feed an electric amp and an acoustic amp or P.A. The magnetic pickups (which now come on all new TL2s and TL3s) are hotter, with less noise, and are balanced for optimal performance with phosphor-bronze acoustic strings. The True Hybrid TL3EC-EMEM-HSS has a humbucker/single/single configuration, like the TL2 we reviewed, and is also available with a pair of humbuckers or three single-coils. The TL3's cosmetics include imperial-style tuners and large abalone inlays on its ebony fretboard as well as on both sides of the waist on its carved top. The whole guitar is solid European maple (grown in Australia). Another TL3 designated BLBL-HUM is all Australian blackwood with a single humbucker between the bridge and soundhole, located in the standard spot rather than an offset teardrop like the other models. Its aesthetic is more traditional. *True Hybrid TL3EC-EMEM-HSS, $3,999.* **coleclarkguitars.com**

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

IBANEZ AE390TA AND AE340FMH

IBANEZ'S AE PERFORMER concept is all about high-end aesthetics and features at player-friendly budgets. The AE390TA offers a distinctive tonewood combination with a German spruce top and gorgeous flamed maple back and sides finished in a brilliant Aqua Blue hue. The AE340FMH features a stunning solid flamed okume top as well as flamed okume back and sides. Both sport Ibanez's secondary soundhole, the A.I.R. Port on the top side, for additional personal monitoring from the player's perspective. *AE390TA, $829. AE340FMH, $799.* **ibanez.com**

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

GIBSON CUSTOM EBONY SERIES

GIBSON'S CUSTOM EBONY series comprises a quartet of its most popular acoustics. Each handcrafted guitar retains its classic features and sound, and features a solid Sitka spruce top and onboard L.R. Baggs Session VTC electronics, along with appointments inspired by the Les Paul Custom, such as an ebony finish, multi-ply binding, mother-of-pearl block fretboard inlays and split-diamond headstock inlay. The series includes the J-45 Custom, Hummingbird Custom, SJ-200 Custom and Songwriter EC Custom. *J-45 Custom, $4,999. Hummingbird Custom, $5,999. SJ-200 Custom, $7,499. Songwriter EC Custom, $4,999.* **gibson.com**

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

TAKAMINE GD37CE PW & GD37CE-12 PW

TAKAMINE'S GD37CE PW and its sibling GD37CE-12 PW 12-string represent striking new additions to the company's affordable G Series. Their dreadnought bodies sport solid-spruce tops and maple back and sides, and are decked out in glossy pearl white, with a beautiful abalone rosette. A split-saddle bridge is designed to offer superior intonation, and the guitars come stage-ready with proprietary TP-3G electronics that include three-band EQ, gain and an onboard tuner. Takamine's director of product development, Tom Watters, says, "We created the two new GD37CE models to cover a wide range of musical styles," and indeed, a guitarist could feel pretty heavenly rocking anything from folk to gospel on them. *GD37CE PW, $849. GD37CE-12 PW, $949.* **esptakamine.com**

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

MARTIN SC-28E & SC-18E

THESE AMERICAN-MADE SC models represent the culmination of innovation Martin unleashed about five years ago with a secret R&D project spearheaded by VP Fred Greene and lead designer Tim Teal. When *GP* was invited to take a sneak peek at the original SC-13 SC in 2020, it was immediately apparent that this oddly S-shaped instrument was coming from an entirely different galaxy, with its crazy cutaway and Sure Align neck system, which together delivered easy access to the fretboard's upper reaches. That model was manufactured in Mexico, as were all four subsequent SCs until a small batch of U.S.-made Custom Shop models arrived in 2022. Enthusiastic response from collectors encouraged Martin to begin building these two Standard Series models stateside, with solid woods and significantly upgraded electronics. The SC-28E pairs East Indian rosewood back and sides with a spruce top, while the SC-18E is mahogany and spruce. Both come equipped with Fishman Aura VT Blend or L.R. Baggs Anthem electronics. Pros will appreciate. *SC-28E, $3,999 with hardshell case. SC-18E, $3,599.* **martinguitar.com**

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

TAYLOR 50TH ANNIVERSARY LIMITED-EDITION COLLECTION

TAYLOR IS COMMEMORATING its golden anniversary with the Circa 74 AV150-10 boutique amp [*see review in* GP *April 2024*] as well as a series of limited-edition guitars that it will roll out over the course of the year. Ranging from fancy and expensive to practical and affordable, the group includes the Builder's Edition 814ce LTD, featuring a sinker redwood top with Indian rosewood back and sides; the 314ce LTD, with sapele back and sides and a torrefied Sitka spruce top; the American Dream AD14ce-SB LTD, offered with walnut back and sides and a Sitka spruce top; the Presentation Series PS14ce LTD, which comes in a choice of urban ironbark with a striped sinker redwood top or figured claro walnut with a western red cedar top; and the PS24ce-LTD in figured, master-grade Hawaiian koa. *Builder's Edition 814ce LTD, $4,999. 314ce LTD, $2,799. American Dream AD14ce-SB LTD, $1,999. Presentation Series PS14ce LTD, $9,999. PS14ce LTD, $14,999. PS24ce-LTD, $19,999.* **taylorguitars.com**

ELECTRONICS

FISHMAN AFX MINI SERIES PEDALS

FISHMAN HAS MADE three new additions to its AFX Mini Series, whose pedals are voiced to handle acoustic instruments' wide sonic range. The EchoBack delay, BlueChorus multi-chorus and AcoustiComp compressor follow the blueprint laid down with last year's batch of four AFX Minis that earned our Editors' Pick Award in the October '23 issue and ranked among the Top Gear of the Year. The EchoBack offers analog, digital and tape delay, and its lone foot switch can be set to use for tap tempo. The BlueChorus offers analog, vintage and classic varieties of chorus, and the AcoustiComp is a super-simple compressor based on Fishman's popular Aura Spectrum. All AFX Minis are voiced and processed in parallel to preserve your acoustic tone. *$119.95 each.* **fishman.com**

ELECTRONICS

L.R. BAGGS HIFI DUET PICKUP SYSTEM

L.R. BAGGS HIFI DUET pickup and mic mixing system (available this summer) is essentially the same HiFi that earned an Editors' Pick Award in the November 2023 issue as well as a spot in Gear of the Year, but with the addition of a second element, the Silo Microphone. Built on the broad shoulders of Baggs' Tru Mic technology, Silo features a new mic capsule and tuned suspension. A discrete preamp with a multipole crossover system seamlessly blends the HiFi Pickups and Silo Mic, so you can dial in anything from punchy and direct to open and airy, all with enhanced ambience and dimension. The quick demo I heard was very promising. *$TBD.* **lrbaggs.com**

ACCESSORIES

NAKUPENDA GUITAR MASTER STOOL

THE GUITAR MASTER Stool by Nakupenda was a favorite surprise find at the 2024 NAMM show. Nakupenda has put a ton of research into making what it calls "the world's first ergonomic guitar performance stool," which is designed to hug hips and align the spine and pelvis to improve posture, thereby relieving back and neck pain by evenly distributing the player's weight. The chair is handcrafted from FSC-certified sustainable North American walnut and is available in two heights. Once while attempting to get comfortable on a bar stool at soundcheck, Leo Kottke remarked, "I always feel like a marionette sitting on one of these things." Not so with the ergonomic Guitar Master Stool. Better still, it has a handy built-in guitar stand on the back. *$459 direct with free shipping.* **nakupenda.co**

ACCESSORIES

SNARK ST-8 TI

THE SNARK ST-8 Titanium brings a couple of ingenious new features to the clip-on tuner format that the brand played a huge role in establishing. A vulcanized rubber collar cushions the back of its interface and acts like a sound shield to cut out external frequencies and vibrations, thereby providing reliable tuning accuracy in noisy conditions. Players will also appreciate the ST-8 Titanium's rechargeable lithium battery, which Snark claims can deliver "weeks to months of continuous use" from one charge via USB, PC or power bank. The high-resolution LCD screen has 360 degrees of rotation and is designed to be visible from all sorts of angles on stage, whether conditions are dark or sunny. *$26.99.* **snarktitanium.com**

AMPLIFICATION

MACKIE SHOWBOX

MACKIE'S NEW SWISS ARMY knife comes armed with pretty much everything a busker needs to rock a gig, anywhere at any time, alone or with a few buddies. The ShowBox is a battery-powered all-in-one performance rig comprising a portable P.A., acoustic guitar amp, six-channel mixer and effects rack. Particularly innovative is a breakaway mix controller that mounts directly to a mic stand and connects to ShowBox through the included Ethernet cable, allowing the performer to manage all channel levels, effects and EQ settings, user snapshots, and the built-in looper and tuner, all without having to leave their stage position. A USB-C audio interface facilitates streaming or recording the gig, and ShowBox can also record straight to an SD card. Custom backpack sold separately. Stay tuned for a detailed review soon. *$799.* **mackie.com**

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ADVENTURES IN FINGERSTYLE ROCK GUITAR, PART 2

The last of our two-part lesson in letting go of the pick to find new techniques and textures.

BY JEFF JACOBSON

LAST MONTH, WE set our picks down to learn new fingerstyle skills we can add to our arsenal of electric guitar techniques. We covered the basics, then left off by introducing harp harmonics. This month, we'll integrate them into our fingerstyle playing in some fun ways. Once again, New York City fingerstylist Gilber Gilmore is back with more videos that demonstrate each of our musical examples, all which you can find on guitarplayer.com. (You can see Gilber's other videos at the YouTube account 1972f1972, and find him on Instagram @gilber_gilmore.) Let's get back into it!

Jazz guitar legend Lenny Breau was the first to incorporate harp harmonics in a most unique way, by creating melodies that alternate them with standard fretted pitches. Inspired by Breau, **Ex. 7a** does just that, and while bar 1 has some standard fingerpicking, it's the second bar where things get interesting. The key here is to silently form the Dm11 chord shape that's spelled out in the bar *before* you play beat 1. (Notice how the final open A note in bar 1 buys you valuable time to move up to the 5th position.) To do this, barre the highest five strings at the 5th fret with your index finger, adding F on the 2nd string's 6th fret with your middle finger. Holding this shape throughout the bar will allow the notes to ring over one another, which is what we're going for here. To begin bar 2, perform the first harp harmonic by picking the 5th string while lightly touching directly over the 17th fret, as indicated in parentheses, then use your ring finger to pick the aforementioned F on the 2nd string. (See last month's issue for a full harp harmonics primer.) The effect produced is a shimmering scalar passage, which would be pretty much impossible to create on guitar without the use of harmonics.

This sort of musical idea would be right at home in a rock setting, possibly

WIRESTOCK

MORE ONLINE!

For video of this lesson, go to **guitarplayer.com/may24-lesson**

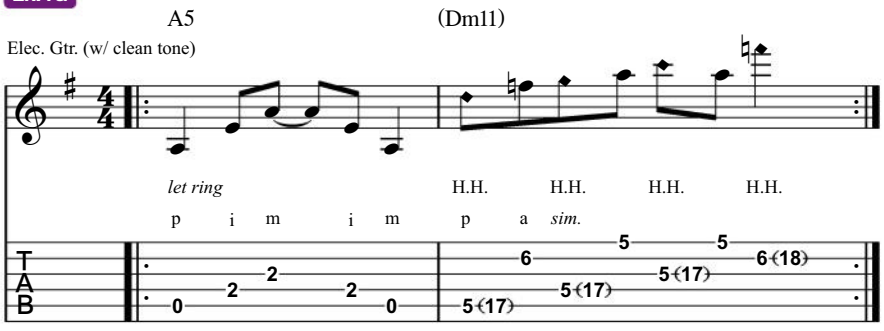
as a pensive intro or a cool breakdown section. (Employ a delay effect to create even more ethereal sounds.) **Ex. 7b** offers a nifty variation in which you will simultaneously play a harp harmonic and a fretted note on nonadjacent strings. You'll need to coordinate your pick-hand techniques to simultaneously pluck the harp harmonic with your thumb on the lower string while picking the fretted note on the higher string with your ring finger. Experimenting with different chord shapes and picking patterns is a fun way to discover some interesting musical ideas of your own.

Next, let's tie the use of harmonics even closer to fingerstyle rock guitar by imagining how Eddie Van Halen might have used harp harmonics. (He actually preferred a different technique, which we'll explore next.) **Ex. 8** is reminiscent of EVH's *Van Halen II*–era playing, and mixes some open A5 riffing with a couple of neatly placed harp harmonics to spice things up at the end.

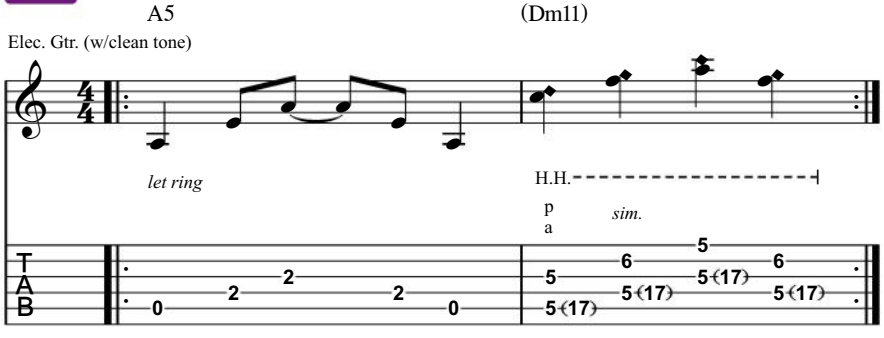
Let's stay in solid Van Halen territory a little while longer and explore a technique EVH was quite fond of: tapped harmonics. While this involves the same basic principle of locating harmonics 12 frets above the fretted note, here you won't be using your pick-hand thumb at all; simply use your index finger (or middle, as Gilmore does in one of our videos) to lightly tap the string directly over the fret indicated in parentheses, using a quick bouncing motion. EVH utilized this technique in a variety of settings, whether he was creating otherworldly licks for his solos or unforgettable chord-based hooks for songs like "Dance the Night Away" and "Women in Love."

Ex. 9 uses tapped harmonics a bit more sparingly than those songs. We'll incorporate just a taste of it into our fingerstyle playing, while still echoing EVH's inimitable style. The tablature indicates to tap only one string at a time, but here's a bit of a guitar "hack": Fret the F5 chord spelled out in the first two beats of bar 1, and notice that the 3rd string isn't played. Let your fret-hand ring finger, playing the F on the 4th string, also dampen the 3rd

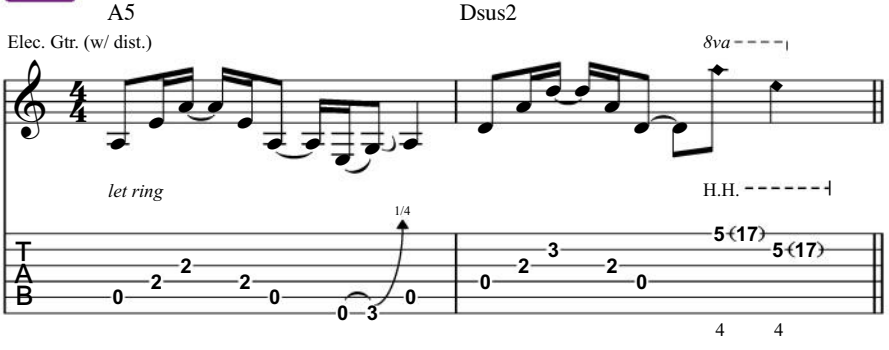
Ex. 7a



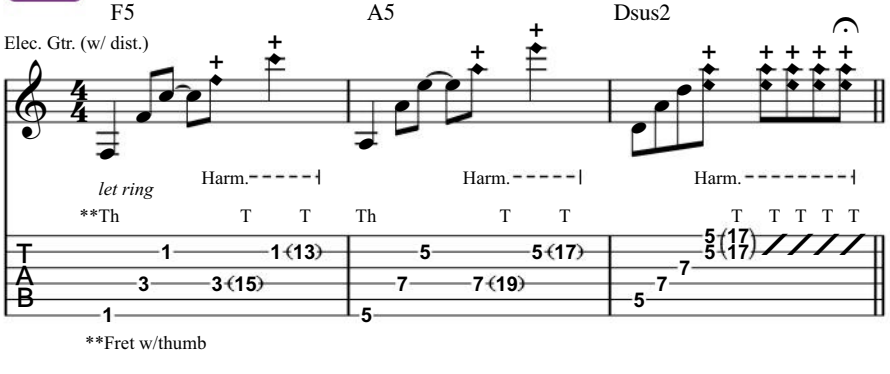
Ex. 7b



Ex. 8



Ex. 9



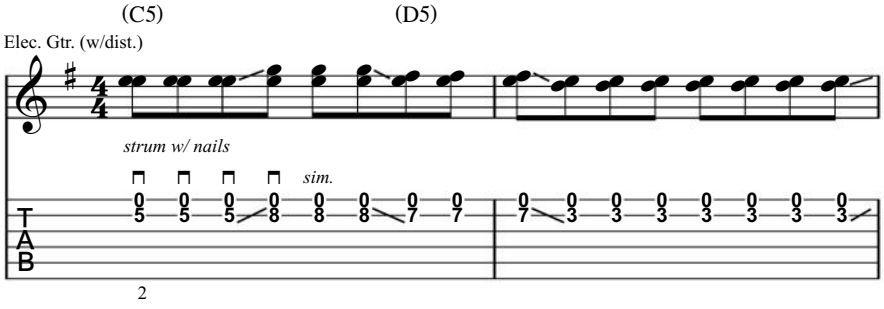
string by lightly touching it. Having that dampened string allows you to be freer with how you tap, because you won't need to be so careful about solely tapping the string indicated and avoiding unwanted sounds from occurring. For example, when you tap the 4th-string F harmonic on the upbeat of beat 3, you can also tap the 3rd string, as it simply won't sound a note.

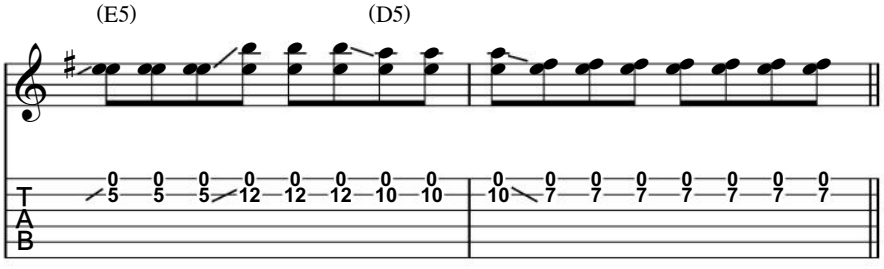
Now let's move away from harmonics and present ourselves with a new conundrum: What if, while playing fingerstyle, you suddenly wanted to play a passage that your sixth sense tells you would sound better played with the sharper attack of a pick? In fact, guitarists like Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham have already tackled this seemingly thorny issue for us. In "The Chain," for example, he creates a repetitive droning riff by striking the strings with his pick-hand fingernails, producing a similar percussive bite to what one would expect when using a pick. **Ex. 10** is informed by Buckingham's playing during the song's uptempo outro. To execute this phrase, simply strike the strings with your fingernails in a repeating downward motion. Since it's more of a broad movement, our new hack can again be used to deaden adjacent strings. Fretting the 2nd string with your middle finger throughout the phrase will allow you to then use your index finger behind it to deaden the 3rd and 4th strings so as to avoid them accidentally sounding unwanted notes. As before, deadening those strings allows you to strum more freely with tapping, instead of having to concentrate on striking only the strings indicated, and this can in turn add some welcome grit.

Let's close out our fingerstyle adventure by tackling some different, interesting grooves and techniques. The remaining musical examples are from Gilmore's impressive cache of ideas.

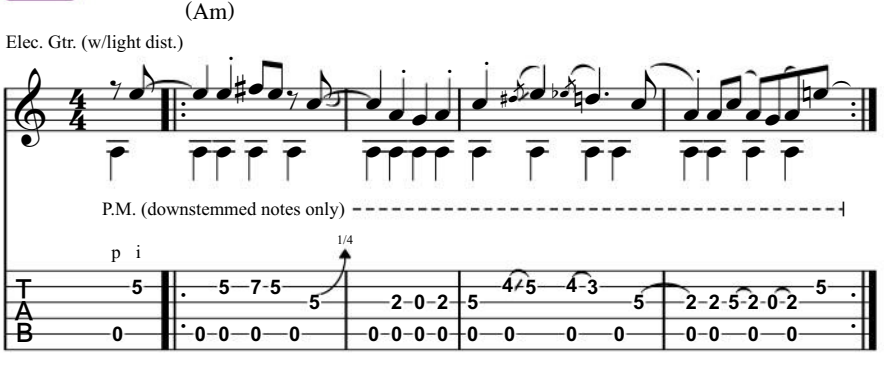
One of the great things about fingerstyle playing is that you can play both melody and accompaniment simultaneously. **Ex. 11** introduces this concept with a bluesy melody (up-stemmed) over a static bass line

Ex. 10





Ex. 11



(down-stemmed). You'll need to do some palm muting here, but only for the bass notes. To accomplish this, rest your pick hand on your guitar's bridge as you normally would to create palm muting with a pick, but lift the hand partially so it touches only the lower strings, leaving the melody notes unmuted. You can simply pick the entire melody with your index finger, as Gilmore does, or use your middle if you prefer. Lastly, if you've already played the Mark Knopfler–inspired Ex. 5 from part 1, you'll have no trouble negotiating the final bar, which involves picking bass notes while simultaneously performing melodic hammer-ons and pull-offs.

You might remember how, last month, we looked at a percussive thumb slap technique (from Ex. 3b). **Ex. 12** applies this technique with a different kind of groove. Start by ignoring everything except the bass line, which is much sparser than our previous example, here creating a pattern much like what a drummer would play on

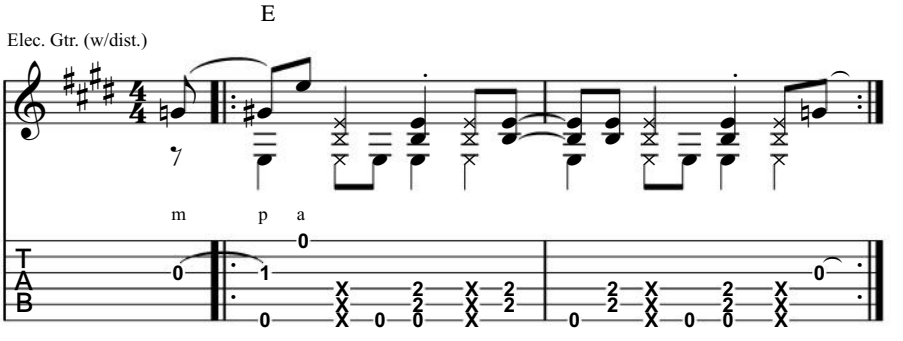
a bass drum. Skipping the pickup notes, simply sound a low E on beats 1 and 3, adding an additional note on beat 2's eighth-note upbeat to help propel things along. (Omit the thumb slaps on beats 2 and 4 for now, substituting a rest.) Then simply repeat the same pattern for the second bar.

Now that we've got the bass line going, let's complete our "rhythm section" by adding percussive slaps to simulate the classic backbeat a drummer would create by hitting the snare drum on 2 and 4. First, let's add the thumb slap on beat 2, hitting the top of the 6th string so as to set yourself up to pluck it on beat 2's upbeat. Now, along with your thumb, simultaneously slap the higher strings with your fingernails to create even more of a percussive thwap, as Gilmore demonstrates in our video for this example. Once you're grooving, wrap things up by adding the initial bluesy lick and the low double-stops.

Ex. 13 employs the same techniques, but this time with a funkier rhythm. Again, let's begin by simply playing the down-stemmed notes, all on the 5th string. But here, we'll include the thumb slaps right off the bat. Starting out slowly and, as in the previous example, hitting the top of the deadened 5th string will set you up for the subsequent pluck. When you're feeling the groove, add in the up-stemmed notes and try increasing the tempo. Play it as slowly as you need to at first so that you can acquire the necessary coordination and make it through without any mistakes, then take the tempo up a notch.

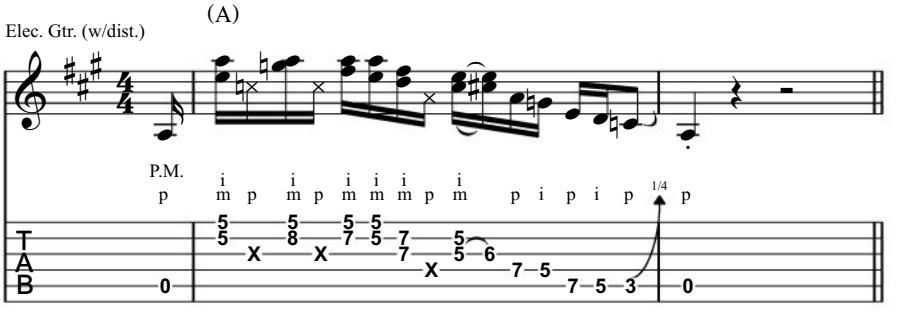
Let's bring in a bit of country flavor with a technique commonly known as "chicken pickin'." It's most often executed using hybrid picking, but for our purposes, we can summon the same pluckiness without using a pick. Now let's bring things home with a fun double-stops lick, presented in **Ex. 14**. Note that, here, the deadened notes aren't slapped; they refer to notes plucked normally, all with the thumb, which are deadened with your fret hand. Alternating with the double-stops, these muted notes rhythmically propel the lick forward while adding a subtle funkiness.

Ex. 12



Ex. 13

Ex. 14



Check out Michael Lee Firkins' 1990 shred classic "Laughing Stacks" for a taste of how he seamlessly blends metal and country, albeit with a pick.

Maybe the best part of having explored these new fingerstyle techniques over the past two months is that now, whenever you switch back to your pick, it'll be even more fun to have its signature attack back. Music, at its core, is about contrasting sounds and textures, so being able to vary your approach will always serve you well.

Jeff Jacobson is a guitarist, songwriter and veteran music transcriber, with hundreds of published credits. For information on virtual guitar lessons and custom transcriptions, feel free to reach out to Jeff on Instagram @ jjmusicmentor or visit jeffjacobson.net.

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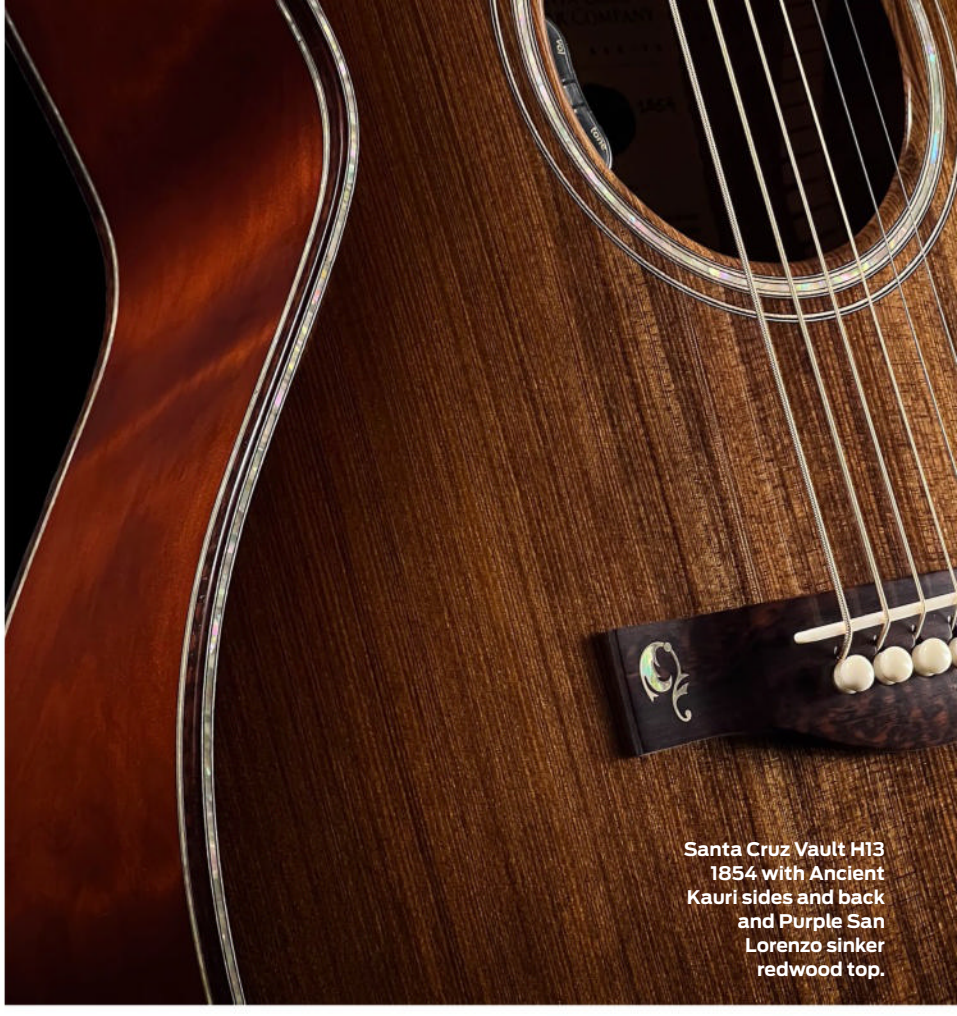
Old Glory

Richard Hoover expounds on the beauty of old wood.

BY JIMMY LESLIE



Santa Cruz Vault H13 1854 with Ancient Kauri sides and back and Purple San Lorenzo sinker redwood top.

SOME THINGS IMPROVE with age. Guitars certainly sound better over time, particularly acoustic guitars, because it's literally all about the wood.

This is a subject Santa Cruz Guitars Company captain Richard Hoover knows all too well. When we spoke with him for our February 2024 Frets feature, Hoover was crafting the company's stunning Vault Series from some of the most prized ancient wood on the planet for release at the NAMM show. We had a chance to catch up with him again at the event for a follow-up discussion about old-growth woods. Here's what he had to say.

Why does old wood sound better?

The reason to a large degree is that the sticky resins within the wood don't harden from the evaporation of moisture. You remove moisture when you dry wood out, but there is still sticky stuff left in there. Let's say a commercial mass-production guitar was made from a piece of wood cut from a tree, dried carefully and stabilized, but the resins remain sticky. It then goes into a guitar within less than a year, maybe even six months. When string energy goes through, it's resisted by sticky stuff.

Every minute when it's living, the tree's sap has a low viscosity and flows freely to deliver nutrition throughout the tree's structure. As soon as the tree dies, the sap begins a process of polymerization, like glue drying. Over time it becomes crystal-like. Give the guitar 10 years, 50 years, 100 years, and it progressively becomes more resonant and sounds better. The resins harden no matter whether the wood is underwater, in outer space or in a master luthier's violin, because the process is not dependent on oxygen — it's the chemical change that hardens the resins and improves the tone of the instrument. Why wait when we can start with more-resonant old wood? We can do that working at our scale of less than 500 custom guitars per year, whereas it would be difficult or prohibitive for a large production company.

What's better about sinker wood that has been submerged in water for a significant period of time?

Let's use the redwood from the Vault Series H13 1854 as our example. There are two kinds of old-growth reclaimed redwood in nature. In this case, there's the sinker that would have tumbled into the San Lorenzo River, got lodged and stayed there for a few hundred years; and there's buckskin, which could have been a tree standing right next to it but didn't quite make it in the river and stayed on the bank. They're both going to go through the same process of polymerization and sound better over time. I haven't experienced a qualitative tonal difference, but the cosmetic difference is very apparent. The buckskin is generally lighter while the sinker, particularly this Purple San Lorenzo sinker redwood, is much darker because of the mineral content that would have leached in and oxidized over years.

What's the first step you take to ensure bringing out the most potential beauty?

The guy I got this from is like an artisanal lumberjack. He doesn't set it up in a saw and slice off the pieces like almost everything else. In the old days, like in the violin tradition, you would split it. A tree grows like a bundle of soda straws. With wind and gravity, those will move around. When you cut a board out with a saw, those holes are coming out everywhere. They're not straight up and down because the grain is going in and out everywhere. But if you split it, the board comes out right on. It separates the straws, and you get perfectly uniform "run out."

Jimmy Leslie has been Frets editor since 2016. See many Guitar Player*– and Frets-related videos on his YouTube channel, and learn about his acoustic/electric rock group at spirithustler.com.*

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The CE24's exposed edge reveals the thickness of the maple cap.

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

PRS

SE CE24, SE Custom 24 Quilt and SE Swamp Ash Special

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

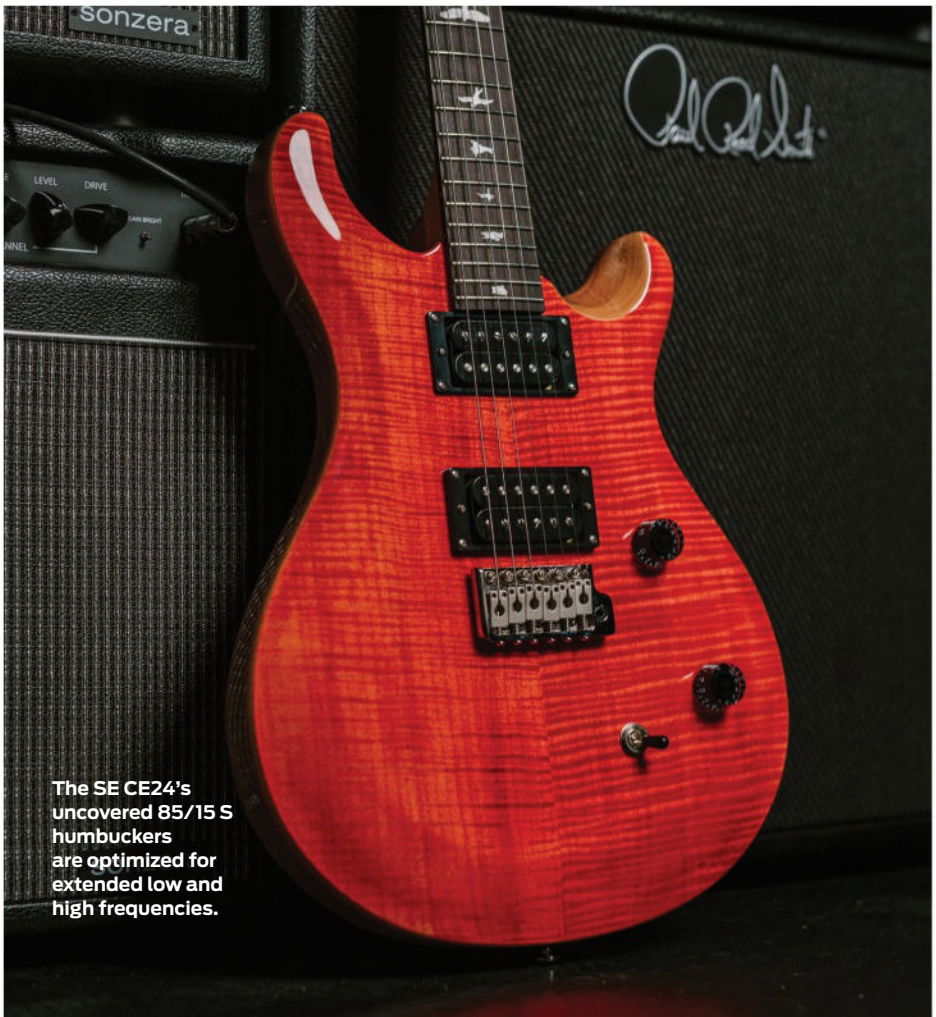
THE LATEST ADDITIONS to PRS's offshore-produced SE line include two guitars that date back to the 1980s — the Custom 24 and the CE24, introduced, respectively, in '85 and '88 — along with a reissue of an outlier model called the Swamp Ash Special, which was originally produced at PRS's Stevensville, Maryland, factory between 1996 and 2002. I tested these guitars through a Fender Deluxe Reverb and a '48 Dual Professional, along with a row of UAFX pedals that included the Lion '68 Super Lead, 1176 Studio Compressor and Orion Tape Delay.

SE CE24

Featuring a mahogany body and a maple top with a shallow violin carve, the SE CE24 is a sharp-looking guitar with its striking Blood Orange quilted maple veneer. The exposed edge shows off the thickness of the maple cap beneath while giving the effect of a binding layer between the top and the tightly grained mahogany back.

Weighing in at 7 ½ pounds, my review guitar felt light and nimble, and it delivered a bright, resonant acoustic sound with good sustain. It also excelled in the playability department courtesy of the comfy, satin-finished Wide Thin neck and a rosewood fingerboard carrying 24 well-attended medium-jumbo frets. Their smooth tips facilitate an easy ride to the upper reaches of the fingerboard, where the scarfed neck joint and sculpted lower cutaway provide easy access to the top frets. The PRS-designed low-mass tuners help the CE24 stay in tune, and this carries over to how reliably the silky PRS Patented Tremolo holds pitch when bending strings with the push-in stainless-steel bar (which is adjustable for tension via a small setscrew). The molded, polished unit feels smooth to the touch, and the six adjustable saddles are free of protruding screws to jab your hand when resting it on the bridge.

The uncovered 85/15 S humbuckers (a 1985-style pickup that was redesigned in 2015) are optimized to deliver extended low and high frequencies without compromising output. They're clear and well defined, delivering crisp, snappy cleans, and plenty of girth for killer distortion tones. The



The SE CE24's uncovered 85/15 S humbuckers are optimized for extended low and high frequencies.

SPECIFICATIONS

SE CE24
CONTACT prsguitars.com
PRICE $699 street, gig bag included

NUT Synthetic, 1 11/16" wide
NECK Maple bolt-on, Wide Thin profile
FRETBOARD Rosewood, 25" scale, 10" radius, Birds inlays
FRETS 24 nickel
TUNERS PRS designed 18:1
BODY Mahogany with shallow violin carve maple top
BRIDGE PRS Patented Tremolo
PICKUPS PRS 85/15 S humbuckers
CONTROLS Master volume, master tone with push/pull coil-tap, 3-way toggle pickup switch
EXTRAS Available in Blood Orange, Black Cherry, Turquoise and Vintage Sunburst
FACTORY STRINGS PRS Classic .009–.042
WEIGHT 7.50 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Indonesia

KUDOS A great-sounding guitar with killer tones and an excellent trem. Sweet price
CONCERNS None

The SE Custom 24 Quilt adds a glued-in, gloss-finished maple neck with white binding.

SPECIFICATIONS

SE Custom 24 Quilt
CONTACT prsguitars.com
PRICE $999 street, gig bag included

NUT Synthetic, 1 11/16" wide
NECK Maple set, Wide Thin profile
FRETBOARD Ebony, 25" scale, 10" radius, Birds inlays and binding
FRETS 24 nickel
TUNERS PRS designed 18:1
BODY Mahogany with shallow violin carve maple top
BRIDGE PRS Patented Tremolo
PICKUPS PRS 85/15 S humbuckers
CONTROLS Master volume, master tone with push/pull coil-tap, 3-way blade pickup switch
EXTRAS Available in quilted Black Gold Sunburst, Quilted Turquoise and Quilted Violet
FACTORY STRINGS PRS Classic .009–.042
WEIGHT 7.74 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Indonesia

KUDOS A classic set-neck model with killer tones, upscale appointments and an excellent trem
CONCERNS None

volume control keeps the highs intact when you turn down, and the tone circuit maintains good definition when you roll the knob down for a jazzy neck-pickup sound or a darker bridge-pickup lead tone. Pulling the tone knob up provides a single-coil sound in all positions of the toggle switch (along with a slight reduction in output), offering useful options when you want crispier sounds. It's particularly useful in the dual-pickup position, where the inside coils deliver a phasey sound that's reminiscent of a Strat's dual-pickup modes.

SE CUSTOM 24 QUILT

The SE CE24 is a toneful and great-playing guitar that offers a lot of bang for the buck. However, if you have an extra $300 in your wallet you might consider the top-line SE Custom 24 Quilt, which shares with the CE24 a mahogany body and maple top with shallow violin carve, but features a glued-in, gloss-finished maple neck and a 24-fret rosewood fingerboard trimmed in white binding that extends around the headstock. The Black Gold Sunburst finish on the quilted maple top of my review guitar looks amazing, and the peghead is also faced with a matching maple veneer as opposed to plain satin black on the CE24.

The same fretwork quality is in evidence here, with the 24 medium-jumbos revealing even crowns, a nice polish and smoothly trimmed tips. As with all of these guitars, the synthetic nut is carefully notched and free of sharp corners, and the factory setup yields solid intonation as you travel up the neck to where the rounded heel and sculpted cutaway give full access to high positions.

THE CUSTOM 24 IS THE DEFINITIVE PRS THAT TOOK THE WORLD BY STORM IN THE 1980S

The Custom 24 proved a stable guitar that stayed in tune well. Here too, the PRS Patented Tremolo has excellent return-to-pitch capability and is so musical in how it responds to vibrato inflections. Even when not bending strings, this piece of hardware is a tonal enhancer that adds noticeable resonance and dimension even when playing unplugged.

The tones delivered by the 85/15 S uncovered humbuckers are excellent, and

the complement of volume and tone controls (the latter with a push-pull coil-tap function) and three-way blade switch facilitate dialing in sounds ranging from crystal clear to massively overdriven, which makes the Custom 24 Quilt great for rock, blues and anything else where the enhanced warmth, compression and sustain of this design can be preferable to the snappier and immediate response of the bolt-neck CE24. It's not a "Les Paul versus Telecaster" comparison, yet there's something about the rich, soulful tones of the Custom 24 that will forever attract players to it. It is the definitive PRS that took the world by storm in the

1980s thanks to Paul Smith's genius for spinning Gibson and Fender elements into a totally modern performance tool for players.

SE SWAMP ASH SPECIAL

Making a comeback for 2024, and available only in the SE series, the Swamp Ash Special features (as the name implies) a swamp-ash body with a shallow violin carve on the top, and a bolt-on Wide Thin–profile maple neck topped with a maple fingerboard carrying 22 nicely worked medium-jumbo frets and abalone Birds inlays. The guitar supplied for this review has a sweet-looking Iri Blue finish that shows off the abundant graining in the wood. Swamp ash is generally considered lightweight, but at nine pounds, our Special was the heaviest of the bunch. This didn't seem to affect its acoustic sound, however, which was airy, open and sustaining. The maple fingerboard tightens up the response a bit, and the bowling-ball-smooth maple sure feels nice under the fingers when bending strings. True to form, the Special offers excellent playability and superb high-fret access due to the scarfed heel and generous cutaways.

One of the main attributes of this guitar is greater sonic range, and to that end the pickups consist of a pair of 85/15 S humbuckers and an AS-01 single-coil, a design that uses Alnico magnets and steel poles for clarity and added punch compared to standard single-coils. With a control complement of volume, push-pull tone and a three-way toggle, the system offers the following combinations:

1. Bridge humbucker. Tone pot up adds middle single-coil;

2. Bridge and neck humbuckers. Tone pot up is bridge humbucker, middle single-coil and neck pickup coil-tapped;

3. Neck humbucker. Tone pot up is middle single-coil and neck pickup coil-tapped.

Having the middle pickup available with the humbuckers greatly expands the Special's sonic palette. Not only are the full humbuckers available for lead and rhythm duties but you now have the options of pairing them with coil-tapped and genuine single-coil sounds (the latter always sounds cooler than cutting a coil on a humbucker). The only thing not available is the AS-01 pickup by itself, but that's not a big deal as the hum/single combinations offer a lot of hip sounds imbued with funky, Strat-like character but have that humbucker muscle behind them. Now you're free to rapid-fire between sounds on the fly without worrying about losing presence and punch, all while enjoying these different textures that sound so cool played cleanly or with gobs of grind, using all that this guitar offers to craft tones that'll help lift whatever you point it at. This sort of flexibility is what PRS guitars excel at, and whether you're into rock, country, funk, jazz or blues, you'll likely find the Swamp Ash Special an inspiring guitar that's well deserving of a place in the SE lineup.

Having the middle pickup available to the humbuckers greatly expands the SE Swamp Ash Special's sonic palette.

SPECIFICATIONS

SE Swamp Ash Special
CONTACT prsguitars.com
PRICE $849 street, gig bag included

NUT Synthetic, 1 11/16" wide
NECK Maple bolt-on, Wide Thin profile
FRETBOARD Maple, 25" scale, 10" radius, Birds inlays
FRETS 22 nickel
TUNERS PRS designed 18:1
BODY Swamp ash with shallow violin carve
BRIDGE PRS Patented Tremolo
PICKUPS PRS 85/15 S humbuckers (neck and bridge) AS-01 single-coil (middle)
CONTROLS Master volume, master tone with push/pull for coil-tap and AS-01 activation, three-way toggle pickup switch
EXTRAS Available in Charcoal, Iris Blue and Vintage Sunburst
FACTORY STRINGS PRS Classic .009–.042
WEIGHT 9.0 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Indonesia

KUDOS A timely reissue of a unique '90s-era model that offers excellent playability and a wide range of tones
CONCERNS This one is just a little on the heavy side

STEDMAN

PureConnect GP-2 and PK-3 Cleaning Kits

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

The GP-2 (left) and PK-3 cleaning kits.

FOR ALL HIS experience with complex circuits and top-notch components, British effects guru and switching systems designer Pete Cornish has long relied on a mantra that points to a much simpler, yet often-overlooked necessity: "Clean the plugs to free the tone!" And while Cornish has no connection to these clever contact-and-connector cleaning kits from stage-and-studio accessory manufacturer Stedman, it's hard to imagine he wouldn't approve of them.

Offered in two sizes, the GP-2 Gig Pack and PK-3 Pro Kit provide efficient solutions to an issue that hinders pure tone: the tarnish, corrosion and grime that accumulates over time on jacks and plugs. The tools in each kit include:

- **¼-inch microfelt tips** (five in the GP-2, 27 in the PK-3) for cleaning ¼-inch jacks, with a hole in one end for cleaning male XLR pins;
- **1/10-inch microfelt tips** (nine in the GP-2 and 50 in the PK-3) for cleaning 1/8-inch jacks and XLR pins;
- **A machined hard-plastic handle** for holding both of the above (two in the PK-3);
- **1 ¾–inch cotton pads** for cleaning ¼-inch plugs (three in the GP-2 and 12 in the PK-3);
- **A 2 ml tube of DeoxIT cleaning fluid** (GP-2);
- **A 7.4 ml bottle of DeoxIT D Series cleaning fluid and one of G Series conditioning fluid** (PK-3).

Clear instructions are included with each pack, and while it pays to give them a once-over, the short version goes like this: Insert the tip into the handle, apply a couple drops of cleaning fluid, insert the primed tip into jack and proceed with vigor!

A quick application of the PureConnect process to a 1965 Fender Jazzmaster that I recently acquired yielded impressive results, evident in a quickly grimed-up cleaning tip. While I have no idea if the guitar's jack had ever been cleaned, I was distressed to find similar deposits on the jacks of several newer guitars, as well as on three of my most-used amplifiers and a few pedals.

In a before-and-after playing test involving the Jazzmaster, a tweed Deluxe–style 1x12 combo and the connecting cable, I could hear increased clarity and fidelity in the tone. While the results will vary from one piece of gear to another, you'll rest easy knowing your plugs and jacks are free of grime and contaminants.

Ultimately, I love that Stedman has taken the time to create these handy kits, and the thought and consideration that have gone into them is evident. The GP-2 and PK-3 provide a very functional means of performing necessary cleaning duties, and their mere presence in your gig bag offers a handy reminder to use them now and then. That alone seems worth the price of entry.

A used microfelt tip reveals grime and corrosion from the jack of our vintage test guitar.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEDMAN. PHOTO OF THE GRIMY TIP: PHOTO BY DAVE HUNTER

SPECIFICATIONS

PureConnect GP-2 and PK-3 Cleaning Kits
CONTACT stedmanusa.com
PRICE GP-2 Gig Pack $30; PK-3 Pro Kit $130

CONTENTS ¼" and 1/10" microfelt cleaning tips, 1 ¾" cotton cleaning pads, machined tip holder, DeoxIT cleaning solution
MADE USA

KUDOS Cleverly designed cleaning tools that make an essential yet underappreciated tone-tweaking task much easier for the average guitarist
CONCERNS Tips in the GP-2 might need to be replenished quickly if your jacks are grimy to begin with

DR. Z

Z-80 Head

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

WHEN DR. Z FOUNDER and chief designer Mike Zaite tells you, "I think this is the best amp I've ever built," it's worth paying attention. The maker has been a perennial name at the top of the boutique amp charts since he introduced his first Carmen Ghia to the market 36 years ago, and the intervening years have brought us tone monsters such the MAZ 38, Route 66, Stang Ray, Z Wreck and others, so "best amp" comes in the wake of a lot of competition.

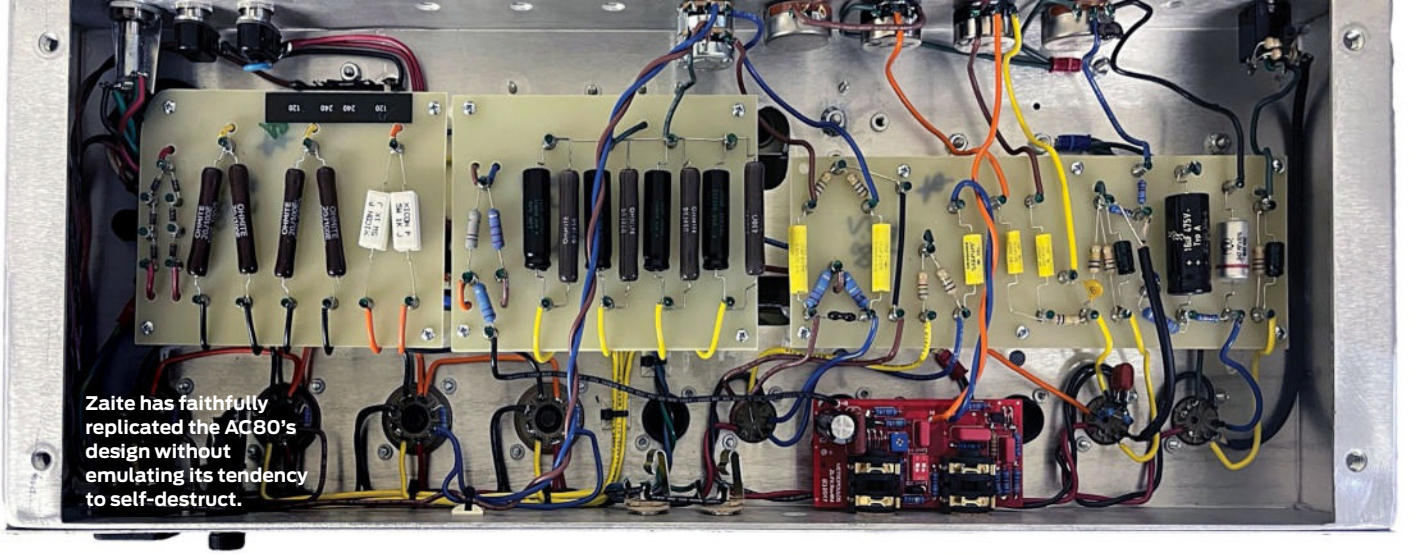
While Dr. Z has a strong reputation for originality, the new Z-80 has its roots in Brad Paisley's own beloved and ultra-rare Vox AC80. Designed by Dick Denney in 1963, the AC80 (also called the AC80/100 or AC100 "80 to 100-watt amplifier") was specifically created to help the Beatles rise above the noise of screaming teenage girls for the North American tours of the mid '60s. History tells us the Fab Four's amps largely failed at that near-impossible task, although they sounded fantastic in the process (or at least later evidence indicates they would have, had anyone actually heard them at the time). Fewer than 300 units of this mammoth 80-watt masterpiece of cathode-biased sonic splendor were built before the more familiar fixed-bias, 100-watt AC100 was introduced around mid 1965.

Following the enthusiastic urging of Paisley, a frequent Dr. Z collaborator, and a full six years of development to bring it to the guitar world at large, the Z-80 tracks the circuit of the best-sounding of these early AC80s and adds a few simple features to suit the performance needs of 2024, without adversely impacting the tonal blueprint. At its heart it's an 80-watt, four-EL34 amp with two 12AX7s in the preamp and a 12AU7 phase inverter, with a single channel and a simple control set featuring volume, treble, middle, bass and master. Couple all that with the fully hand-wired circuit boards (three of them), the high-end components and, in particular, the massive custom transformers required to get the job done, and it all weighs in at 40 pounds for the head alone.

THIS IS THE AC30'S STOUT BIG BROTHER, PACKING CHIME WITH OOMPH, SHIMMER AND BLOOM, AND GUTSY EDGE OF BREAKUP

Part of the reason for the early AC80's great sound, and for the design's demise, was in the way it pushed several essential components to the brink of destruction. The cathode-biased output stage was very much Vox's thing. This configuration was part and parcel of the so-called Class-A sound, and was responsible for a significant portion of that magical clean-yet-girthy, chimey-yet-saturated Vox tone. Such a setup created a lot of heat in any EL84-loaded AC30, but translate that to a quartet of EL34s in the AC80 and forget about it! An alarmingly high number of cathode-biased 1963–'65 AC80s burned up in use, so a big part of Dr. Z's challenge was to capture that same edge-of-destruction performance without the wreckage.

The original early AC80s had individual cathode bias resistors and bypass capacitors on each of their four EL34 tubes, all replicated here. A look inside the chassis shows that



Zaite has faithfully replicated the AC80's design without emulating its tendency to self-destruct.

there are far more of the hulking power resistors and hefty filter capacitors than signal-carrying components. "There are 12 essential components in there that perform better if they have a good while to warm up," Zaite tells us. "For that reason, you want to hit the power switch on the Z-80 and give it a few minutes to slowly warm up before you flip the standby and hit it all with the high voltages. After that, you can use the standby as you normally would."

Zaite went through several iterations of custom-made power transformers before finding one that could help the Z-80 avoid the fate of many original AC80s. The output transformer, however, is made to the precise Vox schematic and custom-wound by Heyboer in the U.S. "When I got it right and built the amp," Zaite says, "I shipped it to Brad, and he played it right alongside his original AC80. He sent me a video, and I thought they sounded identical." Since that time, the Z-80 has remained in Paisley's main touring rig, although the amp has only just now been manufactured for sale to the public.

In addition to the added midrange and master controls, the Z-80 adds a buffered effects loop on the rear panel. Dr. Z uses the drop-in Metro Zero Loss FX loop circuit by Metropoulos for this, a highly acclaimed add-on selected by many high-end amp manufacturers. The amp also has outputs for 8Ω and 16Ω loads. The partner Z-80 cabinet ($1,577 on its own, less in the set) is an open-back 2x12 with two Celestion Alnico Gold speakers and an oval rear port.

I tested the Z-80 with a Gibson Les Paul and a Fender Telecaster, into a range of further cabinet options, including a closed-back 2x12 with Celestion G12H and G12M Creambacks, an open-back 1x12 with a Scumback J75, and a Two-Notes Captor X reactive load box and IR loader. Having known what to expect (or somewhat), I wasn't entirely surprised by the Z-80's general performance. But it's worth noting that this is not the Plexi-tinged crunch-and-wail machine that the four-EL34 tube complement might imply; rather it's very much the stout big brother of the AC30. Chime with oomph, shimmer and bloom, and gutsy edge of breakup are the main tricks in its toolbox, and it does them with a gloriously musical and inspiring voice.

My 1966 Telecaster proved the perfect partner to the Z-80, which delivered thick clean-with-snarl, edge-of-breakup tones that excelled at everything from meaty wound-string alt-country riffs to bluesier leads higher up the fretboard. The amp loved the 1959 Les Paul reissue into these same settings, issuing a little more crunch in the chord work and slightly more singing lead tones, as might be expected.

When pushed harder, with the very effective master reining it in as required, the Z-80 delivers heavier Brit-rock crunch, and it's a breathtaking experience when you let the master out a little and the output stage really starts to breathe. In addition, the amp interacted beautifully with a number of overdrive pedals, and the effects loop worked just as it should, furthering this tone machine's versatility.

All in all, this is an impressive achievement from a brand that has delivered no shortage of great, creative guitar amps over the course of four decades, and it's deserving of an Editors' Pick Award.

SPECIFICATIONS

Z-80 Head
CONTACT drzamps.com
PRICE $3,599 street ($4,999 as matching set with 2x12 Celestion Gold cabinet)

CHANNELS 1
CONTROLS Volume, treble, middle, bass, master
POWER 80 watts
TUBES Two 12AX7 preamp tubes, 12AU7 phase inverter, four EL34 output tubes
EXTRAS Buffered FX loop with send and return, 8Ω and 16Ω speaker outs
WEIGHT 40 lbs
BUILT Assembled in USA

KUDOS A well-conceived and beautifully built update of a rare classic, delivering stunning tone with updated performance
CONCERNS It's heavier, bigger and louder than will suit some contemporary guitarists

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

KLOS

Grand Cutaway Mini

TESTED BY JIMMY LESLIE

CARBON FIBER LIFESTYLE brand Klos (pronounced like the opposite of "far") is rolling out a gang of new gear, and the Grand Cutaway Mini is particularly compelling because of its unique size and features. Travel guitars put Klos on the map and remain its most popular size, but the company is gaining ground in the full-size market with models like the new grand auditorium Grand Cutaway. The GC Mini essentially splits the difference. The concept is a road-ready, seaworthy instrument that delivers fuller sound and better playability than a typical travel guitar, along with gig-worthy electronic options. *GP* was excited to try one of the first GC Minis built with an L.R. Baggs Anthem. It packs the promise of a perfect on-the-go guitar for dedicated cruiser lifestylists and working players alike, so we were curious to see what it would deliver.

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

The guitar arrived in a convertible gig bag/backpack, with the neck in its own compartment. A little tool kit including the neck bolts, a screwdriver, hex wrench and the bridge saddle were in a pocket, as indicated by a note, with a QR code linked to an assembly video.

It was a snap to bolt on the neck and set the bridge saddle on the piezo transducer pickup strip. The action on the top three strings fretted out a bit with the guitar tuned to standard pitch, but a quick loosening of the truss rod made the action almost agreeable. As I can be an aggressive player, and one who uses acrylic nails no less, I called Klos headquarters for advice. They explained that while most of their players prefer low action, it's a cinch to make a little shim to raise the action. I followed their advice using a shim of cardboard under the saddle and above the piezo strip, and it did the trick.

BODY SHOP TALK

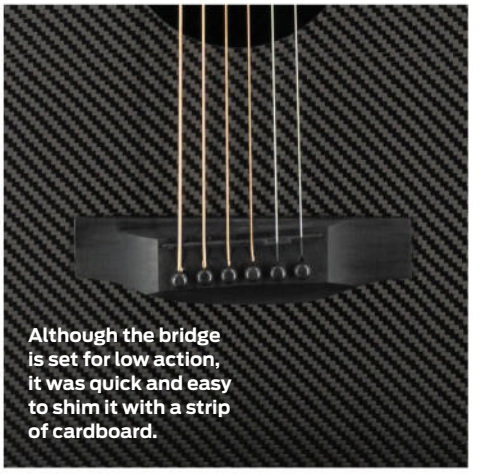
With the guitar set up to my satisfaction, my first thought was, Wow, what a comfortable body size! It's significantly smaller than a triple or double 0, but not too tiny, and the depth is similar. The 24 ¾–inch scale length is slightly shy of a triple 0, and it's just long enough to give the Mini a proper string feel under the fingers and the flexibility to handle dropped tunings while facilitating easy bending. It's rare to find a cutaway, and the combination invites easy access to the entire fretboard, even when standing up. Large cats might want to go for the full Grand, but I wear a men's medium shirt and can testify that the GC Mini feels quite cozy, and it fits in an airline carry-on compartment, even with the neck attached. Add in the backpack factor and portability is superior. In addition to being a great grab for a quick play at an office desk, it's ideal for nature treks, sailing trips or a van-life excursion.

CARBON NATION

Carbon fiber construction is key to the Klos lifestyle philosophy as it's not susceptible to reasonable changes in temperature or humidity and offers superior durability. The GC Mini fares pretty well in side-by-side comparisons to comparable instruments, but there aren't many direct comparisons to be made, as this is an uncommon instrument. The most important revelation is that the Klos Grand Cutaway Mini sounds wondrously full in its own ecosystem. The tone has carbon fiber's familiar EQ curve, with scooped mids, present highs and a clear bass boom. The bass on the Grand Cutaway Mini belies its size, and projection is impressive.

A carbon fiber music vessel this good can be just as inspiring as a wooden one, and a smartly designed small guitar can hold its own compared to a bigger one. It was a joy to play the Grand Cutaway Mini while strolling up and down the beach, during which time a new tune idea came through that probably wouldn't have happened any other way. I recorded my ideas into my iPhone, and when listening back later, I was momentarily confused about which guitar was on the recording, which is a perfect demonstration of how full it sounds.

It was also a relief not to worry about the guitar being out in direct sunlight or getting cold at night, or to have to think much about the weather at all. It was nearly 80 degrees on that freaky-warm January day along the California coast, with waves crashing nearby and sand whirling about in the breeze. Under the stars on the hotel balcony late that night, the temperature dropped 30 degrees, and the action remained unchanged.



Although the bridge is set for low action, it was quick and easy to shim it with a strip of cardboard.

SPECIFICATIONS

GRAND CUTAWAY MINI
CONTACT klosguitars.com
PRICE $1,959 direct for acoustic; $2,399 as tested with L.R. Baggs Anthem

NUT WIDTH 1 11/16", Tusq
NECK Carbon fiber
FRETBOARD Composite ebony, 24.75" scale length
FRETS 20 medium stainless-steel
TUNERS Standard Klos
BODY Full carbon fiber
BRIDGE Composite ebony
ELECTRONICS Optional for additional charges: Fishman Sonitone, K&K Pure Mini or as tested with L.R. Baggs Anthem
CONTROLS Sound hole flywheels for volume and mic level, phase and battery test buttons
FACTORY STRINGS Cleartone Acoustic Phosphor Bronze Light (gauges .012–.053)
WEIGHT 3.4 lbs (as tested)
BUILT Designed and hand assembled in USA

KUDOS Unique balance of size, durability, playability and tone, both acoustic and amplified
CONCERNS It's a little pricey

AMPED UP

The last test was amplification. There are all sorts of options available on Klos guitars, from extra side sound ports to different build materials and a variety of electronics. For this review, I opted for the standard build but went all in on the acoustic-electric upgrade to an L.R. Baggs Anthem dual-element system, hoping to find the elusive travel-friendly, gig-worthy guitar.

Plugged into an L.R. Baggs Synapse Personal P.A., the Klos Grand Cutaway Mini sounded beautiful and almost unbelievably bountiful in the bottom end while being present, but not brittle, on top. It's absolutely gigworthy with the Anthem onboard, and the Tru Mic technology allows the user to mix in the desired amount of mic signal to provide an open, organic mic tone that's especially welcome on a carbon fiber instrument. To understand the price range, the base acoustic model costs $1,959, and the default acoustic-electric with Fishman Sonitone is $2,099. Add another $110 for the K&K Pure Mini, or $300 for the Anthem.

HONORABLE MENTION

While carbon fiber can polarize guitarists, many dig the look, and numerous people I met had a positive reaction to the Grand Cutaway Mini, with members of the general public raving about its cool unique look.

Klos also offers its Hybrid Series, which incorporates wooden components, such as a mahogany neck, and costs less. There's also the new Carbon Timber, on which the carbon fiber grain is straight, rather than woven. I had only a quick chance to hear it at the noisy NAMM show, and to my ears it was both a little less boisterous and more subtle, with perhaps sweeter sustain, which makes sense, as the top can resonate more freely without the fiber weave.

GP applauds Klos for its initiative in creating interesting carbon fiber instruments, and they hit the design target with the Grand Cutaway Mini. If you're looking for a travel guitar, this one fits the bill. The cost is not small, but if this guitar makes sense for your lifestyle, it's worth checking out. For its rare combination of portability, playability, tone and gig-worthiness, the GC Mini earns an Editors' Pick Award.

Guitar Player Editors' Pick

DONNER/THIRD MAN HARDWARE

Triple Threat

TESTED BY ART THOMPSON

COMBINING THREE ANALOG effects in a small package with a low price tag makes the Triple Threat an outsider among today's boutique boxes. However, it all makes sense considering that Jack White conceived this sleek little multi-effector for his Third Man Hardware line, partnering with Donner to produce the pedal in China.

Offered in standard black and limited-edition yellow finishes, the Triple Threat features distortion, phaser and echo effects that are arranged in right-to-left stompbox order, each of which can be controlled with a trio of small knobs. There's volume, gain and tone for distortion; level, rate and depth for phaser; and level, feedback (repeats) and time for echo. Yellow rubber surrounds on the knobs make them easy to grip and more identifiable on the black top panel. Even though they're close together, I didn't find it a problem to reach down and turn them in live situations.

Roughly the size of a TV remote, the aluminum-alloy enclosure has front-mounted input and output jacks, a center-negative jack for the included nine-volt adapter and an LED above each foot switch to indicate on/off.

With a circuit that delivers quality tones without excessive noise, the Triple Threat's distortion is easy to dial in for lead and dirty rhythm, and it was responsive to the volume controls on our test guitars, which included an Epiphone Joe Bonamassa 1963 SG Custom and a PRS SE Swamp Ash Special [*see review, page 84*] that's armed with a variety of humbucker and single-coil options. The Threat's gain is in the range of an SD-9 and pedals of that ilk, and there was plenty of output to overdrive the amps we used it with: a Fender Deluxe Reverb and '48 Dual Professional, and a Vox AC15. I liked leaving the distortion on and going between clean and grind by riding the guitar volume, and the pedal's tone knob could also be turned down quite low for creamy distortion that didn't sacrifice clarity. The circuit doesn't impart a

The Triple Threat is offered in standard black and limited-edition yellow.

lot of midrange color either, which allowed the guitars' distinctive personalities to come through, even at high gain levels.

The phaser is a good choice here, and I like how you can set it for stony MXR Phase 90/EHX Small Stone swirl, as well as shimmering sounds that can nudge into chorus and rotary territory depending on how you set depth and rate controls. The effect has the analog sweetness that's so vibey and cool when used to round off the highs like Eddie Van Halen would, adding color and meaty texture in doing so. The circuit does suck signal, so it's nice there's a level control you can adjust to keep from losing punch when the phase is kicked on.

The all-essential effect here is echo, and it's a good one as it's bone simple and effective, offering warm, tape-style delays that can be dialed in for everything from short reflective and slap-back effects to ambient echoes of up to 600ms that fade out with progressively grainy repeats. These can be made to trail on endlessly when you want to create spacey sound effects by manipulating the time and level knobs. Note that the latter only adjusts echo volume and does not boost output. Here's where a dedicated output level control would be handy, although the format would have to expand slightly to accommodate it (in which case, why not add a tuner while you're at it?).

IT'S AN IDEAL ADDITION TO YOUR GIG BAG WHEN YOU NEED JUST A FEW EFFECTS

As it stands, though, the Triple Threat is a cool multi-effector, and an ideal thing to put in your gig bag when you need just a few effects in a package that takes up less floor space than a lot of single-effect pedals. Kudos to Jack White and Donner for creating this great-sounding and affordable piece of hardware that nabs an Editors' Pick Award.

SPECIFICATIONS

Triple Threat
CONTACT thirdmanrecords.com
PRICES Standard edition $99. Limited edition, $129

CONTROLS Distortion: volume, gain, tone. Phaser: level, rate, depth. Echo: level, feedback, time
I/O Input, output, 9VDC power jack (adapter included)
FOOT SWITCH Three all-metal on/off foot switches with buffered bypass
EXTRAS Aluminum housing. Soft rubber surrounds on the knobs make them easy to grip
SIZE 7.5" x 2.5" wide x 1.0" tall (LxWxH)
WEIGHT .78 lb
BUILT China

KUDOS Small, elegant design that offers three good-sounding effects
CONCERNS None

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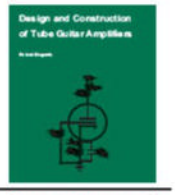

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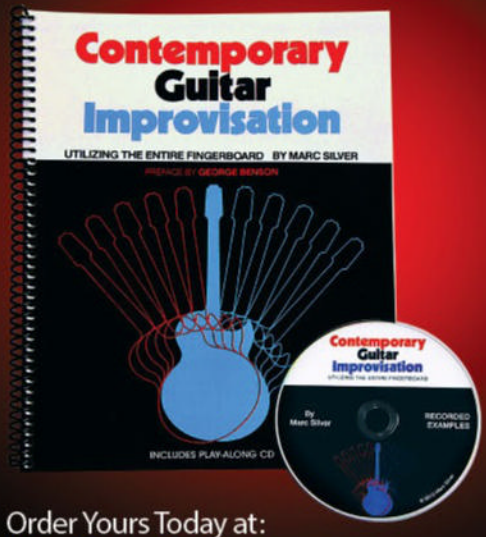

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Have Strat will travel. Robin Trower performs onstage in 1975.

COLIN FULLER/REDFERNS

How I Wrote...

"Day of the Eagle"

Fifty years since he wrote it, **Robin Trower** still gets a lift from his signature track off 1974's *Bridge of Sighs*.

BY JOE MATERA

"IT'S PROBABLY THE best rock and roll song I've ever written," Robin Trower says about "Day of the Eagle," the frenetic, heavy blues track from his second solo album, 1974's *Bridge of Sighs*. "It's still a lot of fun to play, too. To pull it off successfully, you have to be slightly on the edge of making it work. There has to be some effort involved. I think that's what makes it so exciting to play."

"Day of the Eagle" ranks as the pinnacle of Trower's career, the song that established him as a six-string force to be reckoned with. Within the framework of his power trio — which included bassist/vocalist James Dewar and drummer Reg Isidore — Trower's guitar work is soulful, emotive and oozing with the spirit of Jimi Hendrix, a guitarist to whom he has often been compared.

"My three mentors are B.B. King, Albert King and Jimi Hendrix," Trower affirms. "I don't think it does Hendrix any service for me to be compared to him, because he was a genius. I knew not to copy anybody else. For instance, with Hendrix or B.B. King, I never sat down and worked out any of their licks; I was more interested in knowing what was behind the lick — what was the feeling, the emotion that made them play it like that. If you get hung up on other people's stuff, it may stop your own creativity from coming through."

"THERE HAS TO BE SOME EFFORT INVOLVED. THAT'S WHAT MAKES IT SO EXCITING TO PLAY"

IT STARTS WITH THE RIFF

The songwriting process for "Day of the Eagle" began when Trower came up with the song's main riff. "That's where all my songs start," he explains. "Once I came up with that, the changes followed, along with the rest of the guitar parts. And once that was done, I then wrote the song's lyric. I'm not sure anything particular inspired the lyrical matter. They were just ideas that came into my head. The most important thing for me about lyrics, though, is that they've got to be saying something. The sound of the words is important too."

A BEATLES LEGEND

When it came time to record, Trower decided to capture the spontaneous live energy of his band straight to tape, with no double-tracking or studio wizardry.

"It went down as a three-piece, live in the studio," he explains. "First, we laid down the rhythm guitar, bass and drums together, and then I laid down the lead work. Once that was done, Jimmy [*Dewar*] sang the lead vocal. I'd say we probably did two or three takes of the song before we finally got the take that we kept."

Beyond his band's stellar work, Trower credits recording engineer Geoff Emerick for capturing their sound — especially his guitar — and power. "The sound of not only that track but the whole album is down to Geoff's vision and creative ability to capture those sounds," Trower says of Emerick, who famously lent his talents to the Beatles' masterpieces *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's*. "He was an amazing engineer to work with."

For gear, Trower says, "I used two 100-watt Marshall heads with two 4x12 cabinets. I also had a homemade volume booster pedal, which was built for me by a friend of mine who was an electronics guy. It didn't have a distortion unit in it, but it made it possible for me to drive the amps a little bit harder. That was the only effect used on the track. Guitarwise, it was just a newly bought, straight-off-the-shelf black 1974 Fender Strat with the larger headstock."

STILL FLYING HIGH

"Day of the Eagle" has proven to be a popular choice for guitarists, including Steve Stevens, who covered it on his 2008 solo effort, *Memory Crash*, and Pat Travers, who put it on his 2003 album, *P.T Power Trio*. "It's a great compliment that people think that much of it," Trower says.

Although "Day of the Eagle" failed to chart, *Bridge of Sighs* climbed to seven on the *Billboard* album chart, and its commercial success brought Trower validation as a solo artist in his own right. Fifty years on, he remains as passionate about his career as ever. "I just love to play the guitar" he professes. "That is my drug. And that's what keeps me still at it."

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